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Vol. L.



"THEY'RE TRAILIN' US!" HAILSTORM EXCLAIMED. "THAT MEANS
RED-HOT WORK, JOHN!"

"Hyer are other travelers, an' we'll get news o' the gal, mebbe. Stir yer stumps, gents, an' get a wobble on yer hosses; thar is some life left in the brutes yet!"

"A man and a woman," added one of the better dressed members of the quartette. "What are they, Bragg?"

"How should I know? I ain't no wizard, not as I know on. Hustle, an' we'll learn ef that's news. Them critters in advance must 'a' seen the gal ef she come this way, an' they must help us to the game we're huntin'."

The four riders set their animals into a gallop and rapidly cut down the distance between themselves and the other travelers. Ben Bragg had very aptly referred to his party as hunters of game. This was what they were—hunters of human game, proceeding under the cover of law, but with nothing save low hatred and revenge as an incentive to action.

Roger Elbridge, the nominal leader, was a deputy-sheriff. He was thirty-five years of age; a tall, well-formed man, but the possessor of a face that carried no recommendation with it. Some casual observers would have called him good looking, but nothing good, morally, was reflected in his expression.

Jonas Chapin, his fellow wearer of good clothes, was a lawyer. He was nearly sixty, and a little, dried-up person with a shrewd, cunning face. Like Elbridge, he had an outward air of respectability—outward, and nothing more.

Ben Bragg and Ceph Peters were bordermen of a stamp not an honor to that fraternity. They were rough, reckless, meanly clad, dirty and unprepossessing. Montana would have been better off if they had been hundreds of miles away from its limits, as the people of several towns had already decided. There were towns out of which Bragg and Peters had been warned. In some cases these warnings were not heeded; in others, men as resolute as themselves stood ready to give them a reception so warm that the pair kept away.

Thus, they still inflicted their presence upon Montana, but lived a semi-outcast life, liable at any moment to meet some one who had a score to settle with them.

They led the way down toward the foremost travelers, and Bragg soon broke into a wild yell, characteristic of his lawless nature. To this he added a command for them to halt, but the man and the woman rode on without even turning their heads.

"Durned if they ain't deaf!" exclaimed Ben.

"Or ugly," suggested Peters.

"Ugly! ef they're that, I'll take the temper all out of their steel, by thunder!"

"A peculiar looking couple," remarked Elbridge.

"Perhaps, the Wandering Jew and his wife," added Chapin dryly.

"More likely, Gypsies. Observe their jet-black hair, and their wild eccentric attire. The woman wears a red shawl over her shoulders, and a yellow handkerchief over her neck, while the man has a red rag around his windpipe. Otherwise they are in the deepest black, all through. Gypsies, I'll wager something!"

"Anyhow, they hev hosses fit fer a king ter ride. I'd like one o' them high-steppers," declared Ceph Peters, and the covetous gleam in his eyes confirmed the assertion.

"Nothin' ter hinder our havin' them," suggested Bragg.

"None of that. Remember who you ride with!" cautioned the deputy-sheriff.

"Anyhow, them lank tramps may as wal hold up an' let us ketch 'em quick."

Again Bragg yelled, but again his demonstration was utterly ignored.

"Wal, durn me ef they ain't got the giant nerve!" he exclaimed. "Say, they've got ter eat crow ter pay fer the slight on me."

"Don't be too previous with your dinner-bill," directed Elbridge. "We want to get what information they can give, first."

By this time they were close to the strangers, and Ben Bragg putting on a spurt, soon dashed up abreast of them. Then, surely, he thought he would get attention, but they jogged along in the same quiet, heedless way, not even turning their heads, and appearing to be unconscious that another rider was within five feet of them. The burly outcast was dumfounded, but, as soon as he could recover from the shock, he broke out roughly:

"Say, durn yer, be you alive, or be you dead corpses buttoned on ter yer hosses?"

There was no answer, and no sign of attention, but Roger Elbridge, suspecting that they had to deal with persons of sullen temperament, made haste to prevent the rough from doing further prejudice to their cause.

He rode up beside the swarthy stranger, and spoke in his most agreeable manner.

"I beg your pardon, sir, but may I ask you for a word of information?"

The wearer of the red handkerchief had been looking straight ahead, but he now turned the gaze of his keen black eyes upon the questioner.

"Speak on!" he tersely directed.

"How long have you been following this course?"

"Ever since fate started me on it."

"Is fate your motive power?"

"Fate rules the world, and all creatures upon it. What do you want?"

Each reply was sullen and ungracious, and Roger saw even more plainly that it was no easy matter to handle him, but he persevered and kept his bland manner at the front.

"Kindly understand that I do not seek to pry into your affairs; such was not the purport of my inquiry. I merely wish, to put it briefly, to know if you have seen a young woman riding this way, recently."

"Riders, past and present, are nothing to me."

"But I am acquainted with the girl rider—"

"Then seek information from her."

"I don't know where she is."

"Nor I. Go your way!"

During this conversation the strangers had not halted for a moment, but pursued their way at the same even pace. Their splendid horses now and then tossed their heads and champed their bits, as if suggesting that they would welcome an order to break into a gallop, but they were down to a walk.

The swarthy rider had withdrawn his gaze from the deputy-sheriff's face and was looking straight ahead, in which particular he was imitated by his supposed wife; indeed, she had not at any time given the slightest indication that the senses of sight and hearing were hers.

Each made a striking appearance. Their faces were very swarthy, and their hair and eyes very black. Looking at them critically, Jonas Chapin knew Elbridge had been correct in his surmise that they were Gypsies, but he had never seen such radical specimens of the race. Their faces were sullen, moody and harsh of expression. There was no evidence of treachery or wickedness, but few persons would have cared to linger in their company; no one would select them for friends, it seemed.

Elbridge persevered.

"My dear sir, was not my question courteous?"

The Gypsy did not answer.

"Was it unjust?"

Again the swarthy rover looked at the inquirer, and a new gleam in his heretofore black eyes suggested that they could flash with wild light on occasion. He stretched out one hand and pointed to the north.

"If your way is there, go!" he ordered, but in a monotonous voice which expressed no anger.

Ben Bragg lost patience and rode so close to the rover that their boot-legs brushed against each other.

"Look a-hyer, yer half-Injin clam!" he cried, "do ye want ter git licked? Use a civil tongue, or I'll ram the butt o' my rifle down yer gullet. Hear?"

The Gypsy regarded him with calm eyes and an impassive face.

"I have heard coyotes howl before!" he coolly replied.

"Meanin' me? Meanin' me? By the Eturnal! yer will take that back, or this is yer last hour o' life!"

Out came Bragg's revolver, while his other hand grasped the Gypsy's horse by the rein.

"Eat humble pie or lead!" he shouted.

"What's your choice, critter?"

Then Elbridge spoke authoritatively.

"Stop that, Ben! I'll not have any trouble here. You are by far too hasty, while our friend does not yet fully comprehend. Listen, stranger! A short time ago—perhaps one hour, only, perhaps two or three—a girl passed here, riding alone; at least, we think she was making for Cottonwood Blaze. We are not sure, and think if she did hold this course you must have seen her. We know her. Now, did you see her?"

"Yes."

"Which way was she riding?"

"Perhaps there; perhaps yonder."

The Gypsy made a sweeping gesture which took in two-thirds of the horizon.

"I'll give you five dollars to say if she was riding toward Cottonwood Blaze."

"Keep your money."

"Do you refuse to tell?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Again the rover pointed north.

"If your way is there, go!" he directed, in the same impassive voice.

The deputy-sheriff lost all patience.

"You old fool!" he cried, "what do you think you are trying to do? I've a good mind to knock you off your horse, you blockhead!"

"Let me climb all over him!" pleaded Ben Bragg. "Let me show the durned nigger-blood what the fiery-tongued Eagle o' the Rockies kin do! Let me crush him!"

"I am tempted to say, yes."

Looking him in the eyes steadily, the rover replied:

"You dare not touch me!"

"Dare not?"

"You dare not!"

"By the fiends! don't tempt me too far!"

"You dare not!"

Elbridge had raised his hand, but, after a pause, it dropped by his side. The impassive manner of the rover was more effective than could be described easily.

"Let me at him!" howled Ben Bragg. "I'm a fighter from 'Wayback, an' centipedes' bristle in every pocket on my karkiss. Let me at him! Let me—"

"No; the man is an idiot, and the law would not uphold us in the work."

"Cuss the law, an' cuss the idiot!"

"Let him go. Somebody less merciful than we will yet snuff out his candle. Ride on, glum old carmudgeon; we want no part of you. Beauties of your stripe"—he cast a scornful glance at man and wife—"are fit only for wolves to herd with—or, necklace a carrion crow with red, and he would make a fit comrade with you!"

CHAPTER II.

HUNTING HUMAN GAME.

THE deputy-sheriff was thoroughly angry, and his manner was as offensive as his words, as he vented his spite on the rover. He thought any course safe. The Gypsies were the most humble looking of people; penniless wanderers who could call no man their friend; and Mr. Roger Elbridge held them in no more respect than he would a skulking wolf.

Stoical as the rover was, he was not impervious to such sharp thrusts. He looked at Elbridge more directly than at any previous time, and his black eyes flashed ominously. Yet, he made no answer, and his hand was as steady as before, as it held the rein over the mettlesome horse he bestrode.

"Ride on and leave the black tramps," directed Jonas Chapin, impatiently.

"Let me at 'em first!" implored Ben Bragg.

"No! Ride on!"

The old lawyer spoke sharply, and he had his way. If time had been hanging heavily on their hands they might have disgraced themselves by some lawless act, for even Elbridge and Chapin were not above it; but no idle object had drawn them to that wild part of Montana.

Bragg reluctantly allowed his companions to have their way, and the quartette rode on, leaving the Gypsies to jog along in their rear.

"A most ungracious, sullen couple," Chapin commented.

"A vinegary old galoot!" asserted Ben Bragg. "I'd a given a week's wages ter thrash the varmint."

"Do you have many like him, hereabouts?"

"Do we? Say, I've be'n twenty year on the prairies, an' never a critter like them did I see before. We hev all kinds of unnat'rals hyer, but that species never dawned upon my vision afore, by sin!"

"I thought the man a rara avis."

"I don't know what in thunder that is, but I'll swear he's a'll that an' more."

"In brief," interrupted Elbridge, "they are a pair of Gypsies who have got out of Gypsies' usual beats. Like most of their class they have fine horses, and could cut quite a figure if they saw fit. Surely, though, they can't live by trade and barter, in this country, and I should not suppose it would suit them. But let us drop the surly pair. What of Mirabel Wayland? Have we a trace of her?"

"The swarthy man said he had seen her."

"Do you think he could tell the truth if he tried?"

"Doubtful."

"Still, his testimony runs in double harness with our former belief, and we will look for her at Cottonwood Blaze. How much further, Bragg?"

"Two miles."

"Forward, then, at a smart pace, and let's get our hands speedily on the runaway young lady."

"I wish we could overtake her somewhere besides in a town," remarked Chapin, thoughtfully.

"Why?"

"She is cunning, and can put on a great air of injured innocence; she might cause a feeling against us."

"What of it?" Elbridge brusquely demanded. "I am a deputy-sheriff, and the law is on our side."

"This is a wild region, and the people may not be with the law."

"Where should they be?"

"Possibly, with justice."

The old lawyer lowered his voice and made the reply dryly, but Roger did not appreciate the joke.

"Don't be foolish!" he retorted, irritably. "The cause is just as long as we are backing it."

The party rode briskly. The way was through a country favorable to progress, but not to extended vision. There was a sprinkling of trees, and an occasional rocky ridge, so that only their immediate surroundings were visible.

Bragg proved that he knew the country well enough for practical purposes by showing them the town of Cottonwood Blaze on time. It was a place in no way remarkable. Founded a few years before, it had grown steadily and become of considerable size, considering it was remote from any center of civilization, and on the border of an unsettled region.

Ben pointed northward.

"Pass the Blaze an' you're out o' town-life," he explained. "You kin go many a day's ride up thar an' never see a house, let alone a town. It is a wild, unexplored region in many parts, an' trod only by hunters, Injuns an' animals in others. In fact, it's one o' few places left in the West whar civilization ain't set its heavy foot—a paradise o' hunters."

"We don't feel interested in it. Lead the way to a hotel. Are you known here?"

Elbridge turned a questioning glance upon Bragg. Knowing the fellow as he did, he was well aware that, if Ben was known, they would come poorly recommended if the outcast led them.

Bragg grimaced.

"I reckon not. Me an' Ceph was never hyer but once afore, an' we was travelin' fer keeps when we struck the town. We bought some grub, and then jest rattled on. Et ain't likely nobody will know us."

"So much the better."

They rode into the town. Their horses were wearied with a long, rapid journey, and rest was necessary. What would come next none of the party knew. If their human game was not found in Cottonwood Blaze they would be all at fault, and, with no other town within reach, even Roger Elbridge, a man of tremendous energy, felt that it would be as well to sit down and give up hope.

It was not hard to find the hotel. As they rode up to the building the deputy-sheriff looked eagerly to see if he could discover a female face at any of the windows, but without avail.

In a short time they were duly domiciled. It was Elbridge who registered the party, and he looked anxiously for other names, but not one had been put down in the last three days.

"Business doesn't seem to be rushing with you," he remarked.

"We are growing," was the answer.

"Why don't you register all who stop with you?"

"We do."

"How about the young lady who came today?"

The landlord looked genuinely surprised.

"No one young lady has been here."

"Oh! hasn't there? I thought I saw one come in."

"No."

Roger walked aside with Chapin.

"This man tells the truth, and Mirabel Wayland is not here," he commented. "After all, we should not have expected it. She is shrewd, and, knowing we would come here at once, would not be foolish enough, perhaps, to put up right where we would find her, first off. Patience, Jonas! This doesn't prove she isn't in Cottonwood Blaze."

They had supper, and ate so heartily that the landlord fell into fear of a famine. After the meal they did not long linger near the hotel. Separating, each of the quartette wandered slowly through the village, looking for the human game.

Bragg and Peters carried clumsy tongues, and had been directed to ask no questions, but Elbridge and Chapin were to seek for information in a crafty, roundabout way. This the former did, but no one had seen a strange young lady in the place, so far as he could learn.

His journey took him to the western extremity of the town, and there, looking out toward a grove a few rods distant, he caught sight of a moving female figura. It would not do to let any chance slip, and he walked out to see who the female was.

Reaching the center of the grove he suddenly paused, fully satisfied. He saw a camp, with two horses grazing close at hand, and two persons engaged in building a fire. They were the Gypsies seen on the trail. The abundance of baggage previously noticed in their keeping had been unstrapped, and they seemed to have all the necessities for preparing supper.

Neither looked at the deputy-sheriff in a direct manner, but he felt sure these crafty persons had seen him even before they were discovered by him.

Turning irritably, he walked back without a word.

When he met his allies at the hotel again, all had the same report to make, and the result could be summed up in few words: nothing had been discovered.

They were angry and disappointed, and they looked out into the gathering darkness, and felt that all hope was gone. After long and hard riding, after a battle of weeks and a chase of days, the game and the trail alike seemed hopelessly lost.

"And we never can pick up the broken end in this heathen country," added Chapin, gloomily. "Go south and it's twenty miles to a town; four times that if one goes east or west; and north—there lies the country where barbarism reigns. Find the girl? No; we shall not find her; she's lost for good!"

Elbridge did not attempt to revive the speaker's hopes, but both disliked very much to give up entirely. They had followed what they thought a good clew in coming to Cottonwood Blaze, and had been aware that, for the time being, it was the final resort.

If they gave up it would be an utter defeat. Having smoked and rested, they went out again. Elbridge and Chapin went together, and were just as observing as if hope had not wavered. This time, their pertinacity was destined to be rewarded.

Suddenly Elbridge gave a start.

"The girl! the girl!" he cried.

Then he ran to the door of a house at one side, and endeavored to open it without ceremony. It was secured, and he rapped imperiously.

"She's here, Jonas!" he cried. "I saw her, sure. Look to see she don't slip out unawares, and I'll attend to this quarter."

He repeated the knock without giving time for answer, but even this did not bring any one.

"Are you sure it was she?" the lawyer asked.

"Yes."

"Because, if you made any mistake, it might get us into trouble."

"I tell you, it was Mirabel!"

He hammered away at the door again, but, though a light was burning within, his summons was disregarded.

"She has bought up the owners of the house, and they are with her in this matter," suggested Chapin.

"Yes; and probably scheming to get her away, even now. By Judas! I won't stand this; I'm a sheriff, and I'll use my authority!"

Roger stepped back, and then flung his whole weight against the door. As he had expected, it proved sufficient to send the frail obstacle flying from its hinges, and he darted through the opening thus made.

A most interesting scene was revealed to his gaze.

He was in a good-sized room, and before him were two women. One was old and gray-haired, but the other was young and beautiful, though, at that particular moment, the image of terror and dismay.

Elbridge uttered a cry of vindictive triumph not becoming to an officer of law.

"I've got you!" he exclaimed.

The girl fell upon her knees.

"Mercy! mercy!" she cried, in anguish.

"So!" Roger sneered, "positions are reversed, and you are on your knees to me, at last!"

She would have been dull, indeed, not to see that she would look to him in vain for mercy, and she turned to the old lady, instead.

"Help me!" she almost wailed; "in the name of Divine justice, save me from this man!"

CHAPTER III.

THE SHERIFF IS SMITTEN.

The appeal was not in vain, and the old lady advanced toward Elbridge.

"What do you mean by such conduct?" she demanded.

"That's my business!" the deputy-sheriff retorted.

"This girl is under my protection."

"Is she? Wrong! She's in my care!"

"Remember you are in my house, sir."

Roger ignored the reminder, and roughly addressed Mirabel Wayland.

"Come! get up off your knees and prepare to go with us. Hustle!"

"I will not go!" the girl feverishly declared.

"You won't, eh? We'll see about that. Get a move on you, or you'll come to grief; we won't waste ceremony on such as you. It's been a long, hard chase, and now we are going to reap the reward. Back you go with us, and the law shall have a feast—the law, mind you!—the law! Ghastly phantom of dread, is it not?"

He laughed mockingly.

"Roger Elbridge, if you have one sentiment of pity and human feeling left, I beg you will not persist in this course. For the sake of our childhood's days—"

"Childhood!" he fiercely interrupted. "We need not go back as far as that for reminders. Only a few months ago you played the scornful beauty, and now you shall reap the reward. Up! Up from your knees; you can play the tragic when you are safe inside a prison. Move!"

All the evil of the man's nature, and all of his lawless temper, had broken loose. He spoke loudly and savagely, and, taking a forward step, he grasped Mirabel roughly by the shoulder and, essaying to drag her to her feet, nearly caused her to fall to the floor.

She again uttered a cry for help, and, though it was faint and mechanical, help was near at hand. Roger had not supposed any outsider was near, and great was his surprise when a strong arm gave him what was half-push and half-blow; and, taken unawares, the valiant deputy-sheriff fell prostrate with a clatter.

He was up again in a moment, eager to see who had dared lay hands upon him.

As far as visible presence was concerned, it was not hard to distinguish the offender, but he was a stranger—a slender young man who, with his eight-score pounds of avoirdupois, looked anything but a fit subject to stand up before the much-heavier official.

Elbridge looked at him in hot anger. No man of the West was he, but a pale-faced, studious

looking person, who bore the unmistakable air of a city man.

"What in perdition do you mean, sir?" shouted Roger.

"What do you mean, scoundrel?" was the quick, steady retort.

"Scoundrel!"

"That was the word I used."

"By my life! do you want me to chastise you?"

"Keep to the point!" sharply advised the stranger. "You have put violent hands upon yonder lady, and I want to say that if you repeat the offense, I will knock you down!"

"I take it you are her pal?"

"I never saw her until now."

"Then who are you that interferes here?"

"As to my name, it is Walter Manchester. I am not afraid to let the fact be known. Further than that, I happen to be in Cottonwood Blaze just now. I don't know you or the lady, but you can't play the ruffian while I stand idle."

There was nothing boastful in the manner of the young man; he had simply uttered the views of an honest person who was not disposed to stand by and see an indignity done. His manner was impressive, too, and Elbridge saw fit to say no more about the fall given him.

"Do you know who I am?" he demanded.

"No."

"I am Sheriff Elbridge."

"Then your fellow-citizens should get a new sheriff!"

"And this woman is an attempted murderer!"

"It is false!" she cried; "it is cruelly false. I have been wrongfully accused; I have been hunted and hounded by you; but I am innocent. Oh! sir, do not believe the infamous charge!"

"I do not believe it," was the instant reply. "One look at you, and at him, is enough to settle any doubts in my mind. You say you are in trouble. Then, rely upon me, for I will defend you from all attacks!"

"You will, eh?" shouted Roger.

"I am not deaf, sir. Yes, I will."

"Try it, if you dare!"

Mirabel had moved toward Manchester, but the deputy-sheriff now made a rapid forward movement toward her. Manchester blocked the way.

"Keep back!" he ordered.

Roger's only answer was a blow, with the stranger's face as the objective point; but the blow was neatly parried, and then Roger was unceremoniously knocked down.

"You were duly cautioned," Manchester then observed, gravely. "It is your blame, not mine."

The deputy-sheriff was struggling up, furious with anger, but Jonas Chapin managed to do more effective work than his ally. Seeing men outside the house, he at once raised an outcry.

"Help, here! Help! Look after this ruffian, will you?"

A gray-bearded man bounded into the house with boyish agility.

"What's up?" he cried. "What's all this? What's going on? Who's the malefactor?"

"Yonder man!"

"It is false!" declared Manchester.

"He is drunk and violent."

"You speak falsely, and you know it."

The new-comer interrupted in a nervous manner which seemed peculiar to him.

"Stop, stop! No more of that in my presence. Drop your heads, for I am the Honorable Phineas Doane, Mayor of Cottonwood Blaze!"

Elbridge had been wiping the mist away from his eyes excitedly.

"You are just the man we want to see, sir. I am a deputy-sheriff, and have been assaulted by criminals. This woman is an attempted murderer—"

"It is false!" Mirabel interrupted, almost hysterically. "I am falsely accused, and I implore your protection."

"Ha! there seems to be a difference of opinion here."

"Moreover," put in Jonas Chapin, "we want yonder man arrested;" and he pointed to Manchester. "Without provocation he attacked my friend, Mr. Elbridge, and twice felled him to the earth with a cowardly blow."

"Benson, arrest him! There's no excuse for him; he is not a woman. We won't have any slugging in this town. Arrest him!"

The mayor gave this order to one of the men who had accompanied him, and that person started forward, but Manchester made a deprecatory gesture.

"Mr. Doane, I beg that you will not proceed hastily in this matter. For myself I have little to say, only informing you that, though I did strike that fellow, it was simply because he had put violent hands upon yonder lady. For her, I bespeak your most careful attention. Strangers though all here are to me, I feel sure she is in the right and he, wrong."

"He is wrong—he is a merciless persecutor!" cried Mirabel, tremulously.

"I am Sheriff Elbridge, with the law at my back!" grandiloquently reminded Roger.

Mayor Doane looked bewildered.

"If you are all what you claim, there must

be a good many pairs of angel's wings around here, but I have not yet grasped the facts of the case, and can't get hold of them in this informal way. The proper place to settle it is in the court-house, and that's where I'll round you all up. I won't ape city fashion and keep you waiting a week, but will order the trial right away. Benson, arrest the whole party and take 'em to court, and then send out word for the 'boys' to come in and see the fun!"

It was apparent that the magnate of Cottonwood Blaze was an original character, and run things in his so-called city in a fashion to suit himself.

Neither Elbridge nor Chapin opposed his plan, but Mirabel Wayland did. She was still very much agitated, and there was more of misery and pathos than logic in the appeal she made. She asserted her innocence of all wrong-doing, and begged Doane to let her go.

"Can't do it!" he declared. "The law is rigidly enforced in this place, and I can't go back on precedents, but this I will say. I like you and your style, and hope you will clear yourself. You can depend on me to give you justice."

Manchester was not so sure of that. He noted the fears manifested by the girl and the confidence of her enemies, and was very much of the opinion that an examination, and the subsequent decision, would be very one-sided.

As for himself, it was clear that he was already under the ban, and could not help Mirabel by acting as her defender in Doane's impromptu court.

He had come from a law-abiding part of the country, and made no resistance when one of the men formally put him under arrest. Those who followed the mayor were all officers under him, who had been out on official business, and they took all hands in custody without ceremony.

They were marched to the court-house, and preparations began for the examination.

Chief among these preparations, in the mayor's opinion, was the notification of the citizens, or, as he constantly referred to them, the "boys;" and the latter did not disappoint their august leader in the matter of a good-sized audience.

The court-room began to fill up quickly and completely.

Two persons came, as spectators, who were not citizens of the place. They were a man and a woman, both dark-faced, and conspicuous by their jet-black hair and eyes. The man wore a red handkerchief around his neck, while the woman sported a red shawl and yellow handkerchief. They stood together, never speaking even to each other, and their general air was sullen and gloomy.

At any time, or in any place, the swarthy pair would have caused curiosity, and there was general inquiry as to their identity. It was some time before any one was found who had ever seen them before, but light was finally obtained.

"They're Gypsies," explained an old miner, "an' the greatest heel-an'-toe exponents in the Nor'-west. The man is named John—generally called 'Dark John'—an' the female, Hagar. That's erbout all that anybody knows on 'em. They are man an' wife, an' wide wanderers. I reckon they hev tramped erround from the Mississip ter Puget's Sound, though, fer they're seen in all sections. Their favorite stampin'-grounds is the wild regions whar thar is nobody ter see them but Injuns, grizzlies, wolves an' a few stray white hunters. They rarely show up at the settlements, an' then only at the most remote ones, ter get supplies. The Lord only knows what all their wanderin' is for—I doubt ef they do, theirselves, except it was born in 'em."

It was about such an account as was to be expected of the somber-looking couple, and, having gained a degree of light, few persons noticed them any further.

But Dark John and Hagar, though silent, watched all that followed closely. If they were deeply interested they gave no sign, and their expressions remained impassive except for the sullen air which always hung over them so strongly.

CHAPTER IV.

THE ACCUSATION OF CRIME.

"ORDER in the court!"

It was the voice of Mayor Doane. He had seen the "boys" assembled to his satisfaction, and was now ready to hear the case. In Cottonwood Blaze he was judge and jury, all in one, and all by his own appointment, for no one at the town had ever been qualified to act in any capacity except as regarded his own due election as mayor.

"We will now proceed to business, and, though I'd like to see the boys have fun, I fancy it won't take us long."

He looked at Mirabel Wayland in a friendly way. He was not a bad man, and her face and manner had so appealed to his sympathy that he hoped she would clear herself triumphantly.

Elbridge and Chapin were on hand to accuse her, but Walter Manchester was not present. Mayor Doane allowed no fighting in his munici-

pality, and, despite the young man's assertion that he had only defended Mirabel from the attack of a ruffian, he was then reposing in a prison cell, in another part of the court-house.

Mirabel was utterly friendless, and she realized her position keenly. Men and women stared at her, but no one spoke a kind word, and she was already sure what Doane's decision would be.

"Deputy-sheriff Elbridge," proceeded the mayor, "get your legs under you for props and set the machinery of your jaws a-running!"

It was not a very dignified direction, but it was enough for Elbridge. He rose promptly and began:

"Your Honor, I am, as you have indicated, a deputy-sheriff, and reside at the thriving city of Liberty—"

"How is real estate selling there, now?" the mayor interrupted.

"Better than ever."

"Good! Go on!"

"Yonder young woman, Mirabel Wayland, has also recently been a resident of Liberty. She came there an entire stranger, but her plausible manner soon won her friends and good reputation. She became housekeeper for one of our most reputable citizens, aged Horace Granger. The old man was utterly taken with her, showered favors upon her, made his friends hers, and soon lifted her far above the level of an employee. In fact, work and she became almost total strangers, and she lived like a lady."

"She looks it!" quoth the mayor, with a friendly nod to Mirabel.

"Hear the sequel, your Honor. In our town we also had a man named John Allenton, a man of fifty, who had been a physician in the East until his health gave out. He came to Liberty to recuperate, intending to abandon medicine, but found he couldn't do it. We insisted on his curing our ills and ailments, and he succeeded so well that we were all dead gone on Doctor Allenton."

"Doctors' patients usually are dead-gone!" dryly interrupted the mayor.

"This doctor was a fine man and a skillful physician. He, too, however, took a fancy to the young woman; he fell in love with her!"

Up to this point Mirabel had looked only at the mayor, the imploring expression never leaving her face; but she now turned a strange, intense gaze upon Elbridge. What it meant only she and her accusers knew, but it caused wonder among those nearest her.

"Miss Wayland was in clover," continued the deputy-sheriff, with a sneer. "She had come there a friendless nobody, but had infatuated Allenton and Granger."

The prisoner's hands moved tremulously, but not a word passed her lips.

"Soon, however, unpleasant rumors went abroad. It was said she was playing fast-and-loose with the doctor, and his own moody, peculiar manner confirmed the belief. She, however, kept in Granger's good graces, and people actually began to say she was to marry him, instead of Allenton. You see, the doctor was poor, while old Granger was rich."

With this sharp thrust Elbridge for the first time looked at Mirabel, but her own gaze was on Doane's face again.

"Allenton left town, and went, no one knew where. It was said Miss Wayland had fooled with him as long as he could endure it, and he had gone away broken-hearted."

"Ain't you lugging in too much local history?" abruptly asked Doane.

"Patience, my dear sir; the end is near. Shortly after, we had a sensation, one morning. The news went out that Horace Granger was dead, the victim of heart disease."

Mirabel drew a deep, audible breath.

"Sure enough, Granger lay apparently lifeless, and preparations were made for the funeral. Miss Wayland wept copiously, refused to be comforted, and spent most of the time in her own room, invisible to all."

"Then appeared Jonas Chapin, attorney-at-law, and stated that he had in his possession a will he had drawn up for the deceased only a few days before, and that it had been Horace Granger's explicit direction that, when he died, the will should be read before his burial, and by his coffin."

"It was a singular request, but 'twas obeyed. The best friends of the deceased gathered, and there, too, was Miss Wayland, who wept softly and decorously. The will was read. Your Honor, it was known that Granger had four living children, but the will gave every penny of his property to Mirabel Wayland!"

Elbridge paused for effect, and achieved his object so well that Doane exclaimed:

"Strange!"

"The strangest is to come," declared the deputy-sheriff, in a loud, clear voice. "Imagine the scene, your Honor, when the supposed dead man suddenly sat upright in his coffin and, pointing one finger at Mirabel Wayland, exclaimed:

"Murderess!"

Roger Elbridge should have been an actor. He sprung the surprise on his hearers so dramatically, so suddenly, that there was a general nervous start, even the burly miners present, not escaping the contagion. As for Mirabel, her

head sunk so low that no one could clearly see her face. The visible parts were pallid.

"Granger was alive," the narrator resumed, "and had only been in an unconscious state. What caused it? you will naturally ask. I reply, it was a powerful drug which had for the time suspended all his powers of life. He had been poisoned, but an insufficient dose had enabled him to rally just in time.

"Who did it? will be your next question. Granger told the story when he vehemently accused Mirabel Wayland. You should have heard the denunciations he poured out upon her. He declared she had craftily induced him to make the will in her favor, and then, being sure of the money, as she thought, had poisoned him. Imagine the atrocity of such a deed!"

Mayor Doane raised his hands and shook his head in silence.

"Miss Wayland was arrested and put in jail," continued Elbridge, "but it did not hold her. She escaped, and a pretty chase she has led us. I told you she was an attempted murderer. Horace Granger still lives, but is a madman. After his recovery reason soon deserted him, and, under the evil spell of the same drug which so nearly took his life, he lost his reason. He can not recover, and this woman is wanted for the crime. We have pursued her a long ways, and now, your Honor, we respectfully ask you to deliver her to us—to me, Deputy-Sheriff Elbridge."

Roger finished his oration, brushed the perspiration away from his forehead, and rested on his laurels.

Lawyer Chapin rubbed his chin and covertly winked at his confederate.

"A deuced clever appeal," he commented, in a low tone.

Mayor Doane looked at Mirabel with a mixture of sternness and sorrow.

"Prisoner, you and I have heard this story," he then remarked, not unkindly, but in a way which told of a fixed opinion. "What have you to say?"

Mirabel rose slowly. It was plain that she made a great effort to maintain calmness, but her manner told of emotions which would not be hushed entirely.

"Your Honor," she answered, tremulously, "you have heard a story which, in part, is true, but I call upon Divine justice to hear me when I say I am innocent of all charged against me. There is a mystery—an awful mystery—about Mr. Granger's illness, but I never harmed him. Harm him? Harm the good old man I loved so well, who befriended me in the hour of my need? Never, never!"

Her calmness deserted her, and the last words were uttered vehemently.

"Can you prove it?" Doane asked, slowly.

"Not by Granger!" sneered Elbridge.

"Your Honor," she cried, "ask yonder man why he oversteps the bounds of official duty to taunt me, to prejudice my cause! Ask him why he hates me so bitterly! Ask why he is a vengeful, not a dignified, officer!"

"I remember the poor old man who, with horror in his manner, accused you of trying to poison him," hastily explained Roger. "Even an official rock may be moved by the baseness of crime."

"Silence, all!" cried the mayor. "Girl, what proof have you of your innocence?"

"None!"

"None?"

"Heaven, alone, knows I am innocent."

"But you answer to this accuser—"

"Simply that I am innocent."

"An assertion that, in law, amounts to nothing."

"I know it."

Doane sat and gazed silently at the girl. She studied his face with feverish anxiety, and could not fail to read what was there. He pitied her, but, as an officer, was against her.

"Don't send me back!" she cried.

"I must!"

"Don't! don't! I tell you I am innocent, and I had rather die than go with that man. Oh sir, you don't know what you are doing. Save me from them!"—save me!"

"This is painful," murmured the mayor. "If you can give proof of innocence, present it at once, but don't make vain appeals to me. You make it hard for me—"

"Hard for you! And what of me?"

Doane turned resolutely to the deputy-sheriff.

"The prisoner shall be put in a cell for tonight, and in the morning—"

"I prefer to start homeward at once," suggested Roger.

"You can't have the girl now!" was the sharp answer. "I represent the law, and I'll stand by it, but we are not in a race to beat the mile record. To-morrow will do. She goes to a cell now, and, unless she produce proof by morning, you shall take her away."

"No, no!" cried Mirabel, wildly. "Oh! in mercy's name, do not do this thing. Pity me!—have mercy upon me! Save me, save me!"

She had clasped her hands as she made this almost frantic appeal, and now flung herself at the mayor's feet. Her agonized tones cut through the hard exterior of many a miner's heart there, who had felt no pitying sentiment

for any one in long years, but few there were who forgot how Roger Elbridge had thrilled them in telling *his* story.

If the young woman was as bad as was charged, she had cunning enough to act a part now.

Doane hastily motioned to his subalterns.

"Take her away!" he exclaimed, nervously.

The order was obeyed. Mirabel screamed when their hands were laid on her, but her resistance was only brief. Her strength fled, and it was a half-fainting form that was borne to the north end of the room, and into a cell.

Then all the spectators fell to talking—all but two.

In the midst of the excited crowd stood two persons who had watched without emotion, and now stood in utter silence, impassive, sullen, apparently indifferent.

They were Dark John, the rover, and his swarthy companion of the trail, Hagar.

CHAPTER V. DONE BY NIGHT.

THE court-room was silent and nearly deserted. Opinions could be exchanged as well outside as in, and, having no more to see or hear, the people of Cottonwood Blaze had gone home. Only the jailer remained in the room. He had to stay there all night, and was making some preparations when a knock sounded at one of the cell doors.

It was that occupied by Walter Manchester. The jailer opened a small slide near the door.

"Is it over?" Manchester asked, eagerly.

"All over."

"What is the result?"

"The gal goes back ter Liberty, ter be tried for murder."

"Just powers! she is not guilty!"

"Kin you prove that?"

"No; but one look at her face—"

The jailer laughed.

"Young head means *very* young head!" he observed.

"Tell me all about it."

"I'm no sieve, and this is all I'll tell: She is charged with bein' an attempted murderer, and the case has be'n so wal presented that Mayor Doane is goin' ter let them take her away in the mornin'. Say, by the way, ef that's done how kin you be tried?"

"Never mind me. Let us speak of the girl."

"You'll find Doane will 'mind' you; he don't allow sluggers an' brawlers in this city."

"Nonsense! I merely defended a lady against the attack of a ruffian."

"You seem tolerable ready an' handy with yer fists."

"If it will do you any good to know, I'll say I learned the art in college, in good old New England. Hard study there told on my health, and I took up boxing and kindred athletic sports to offset mental work. I have now graduated, and am in the West to try and build myself up anew."

"Your cheeks are pale, an' a trifle thin, but, by mighty, you don't seem lackin' in muskle."

"Now, let us speak of the girl—"

"I won't! Good-night!"

The slide was closed with considerable force, and the interview ended abruptly. The jailer went back to his duties, and the young man from the East was left alone. The former made up his bed, as he always did when he had prisoners to look after, and then lay down.

In the morning, Elbridge, Chapin, Ben Bragg and Ceph Peters were early astir. The deputy-sheriff was not one to trust other men implicitly for he knew it would not be safe to trust himself; so he wished to get started away from Cottonwood Blaze as soon as possible, before Doane could change his mind.

Having eaten breakfast they waited anxiously for the mayor to keep his promise and call on them, and they were not long kept in suspense. He came and proceeded to business at once.

"If you want an early start, finish up your business and I'll set you going," he directed.

"We are entirely ready to go, sir."

"You are? Then you're early birds, sure. Well, come over to the court house."

They went at once. The big outside door was unlocked, and they entered.

"Hullo!" quoth the mayor, "the jailer isn't up. Odd that he should turn sluggard. Hey! Tom Rounds, get a move on you and crawl out of bed— Thunder!"

The exclamation was one of astonishment. The jailer lay upon his bed, but he was bound and gagged, and perfectly helpless. Unintelligible words gurgled in his throat, and Elbridge sprung forward and released him.

"What in blazes does all this mean?" Doane demanded.

"The prisoner!" mumbled Tom Rounds, rubbing his stiffened jaws.

"What prisoner?"

"The gal!"

The mayor ran to the first cell. The door yielded to his touch; it opened, and he saw a vacant room. Roger was at his shoulder, and the man from Liberty uttered a cry of rage and dismay.

"Gone! By the flends! what foul play is this?"

Doane wheeled upon the jailer.

"Tom, stop chafing your jaws, and use them to practical purpose. What's all this? Where's the girl?"

"They took her away. They crawled in through a winder, pounced on me an' tied me up. Then they took her away."

"Who took her?"

"The Gypsies!—the brown-faced man an' his wife who was at the trial, last night. Dark John, I heard some one call him."

"And did you let one man overcome you?"

"One man! Say, when I was tusslin' with John, that wife o' his jest belted me in the jugular with her bare fist, an' I see seven skies full o' stars. One man! B'gosh! ef you think the female Gypsy ain't as good a man as either o' you, jest try her a hack!"

"Be coherent!" ordered Elbridge. "Do you really mean that the Gypsies have robbed us of the girl?"

"Yes."

"And taken her away?"

"Sart'in."

"At what hour was it done?"

"Midnight, mebbe."

"Lost again!" fiercely cried the deputy-sheriff. "You pusillanimous fool! I have a good mind to knock you down and tread on you—"

"You try it, and I'll knock *you* down!" declared the mayor, warmly. "Tom Rounds is a good man, and he shall not be abused because misfortune has come to him."

"Perhaps *you* were in the scheme."

"What's that?"

"I'm not sure of *your* good faith, Mr. Mayor Doane. This escape is mysterious, and there may be treachery in high places!"

Elbridge's temper and disappointment had over-mastered him, and he made a charge he would not have given speech to in calmer and more reasonable moments. He soon saw his mistake. Mr. Doane leaped into the air, cracked his heels together, and came down with his fists in position that no pugilist could laugh at.

"Oh! you sneakin' villain!" he shouted, "how dare you say such a thing to *me*? I, turn ag'in' justice and let loose an accused murderer? Say, you put up your dukes, stranger, and I'll either take to my bed for a month or send *you* there! Come at me! Hang it all! one of us has got to be licked like all creation!"

Jonas Chapin saw that the eccentric mayor was in earnest, and hastened to act the peacemaker.

He had no easy task, and barely averted a fight, while as for a reconciliation, that was out of the question. Elbridge realized his error, but Doane was not to be placated; his pride was too deeply hurt.

He finally calmed down, however.

"I'll give you leave to investigate here," he promised, "but if, as seems likely, your game has flown, you'll have to do the finding. Neither I nor any of my people go a foot on the trail. Give the story in detail, Tom!"

The jailer obeyed, but could add but little to what he had told before. He had been awakened from sound sleep to find two persons already binding him, and had been overpowered, bound and gagged after a brief struggle.

The assailants were John and Hagar, the Gypsies. They were not unnecessarily harsh to him, and hardly spoke a word during the affair, but were quick and systematic in all their movements. Taking the jailer's keys they opened the door of Mirabel's cell and liberated her.

"I suspected, when we met those black faced knaves on our way to this town, that they were her allies," Roger asserted venomously.

"That's where you put your foot in it," returned Tom Rounds. "I made out from talk I overheard before they left the cell that the gal overtook the Gypsies on the trail as she was comin' here. She had never seen them before, but, knowin' she was pursued by you, she asked them ter promise not ter say they had seen her."

"They would promise *me* nothing," Roger complained.

"Nor her. Perversity runs in their blood, an' she got no pledge. Still, it seems their contrariness was as good as a pledge when you showed up."

"Perdition take them!"

"You seem ter carry a blunt tongue," observed Tom, frankly, an' I guess Dark John was right when he said you abused him."

"I gave him only his just deserts."

"He did not think so, an' it was 'cause you abused him that he and old Hagar freed the gal. Now, you've got the whole story."

"And correctly, too, I do believe," added Chapin. "I warned you, Elbridge, not to misuse the swarthy wanderers. Ice-like as they appear they carry hot hearts, and, caring not a rap for law, they took revenge at the first opportunity."

"They shall repent it dearly!" asserted Elbridge, his elevated voice conveying the idea that he believed his hearers to be deaf. "I'll pursue at once; I'll have Mirabel again; and the Gypsies—well, let them look out for themselves when I get hold of them. To horse! We start at once!"

"What about Walter Manchester?" asked Doane.

"Keep him until we return."

"Which you may not do for a month. No; his trial takes place to-day, or I set him free."

Elbridge hesitated for a moment.

"If you are so pig-headed, do as you see fit. I'd like to repay the blow he gave me, but far more important matters demand attention. Come!"

Motioning to his followers, he left the room, and Chapin, Bragg and Peters followed. Mayor Doane promptly took the key and unlocked Manchester's door.

"You have the freedom of the town for just long enough to get your horse and pay your hotel-bill!—don't forget to pay!—and then I want you to skip. The air of Cottonwood Blaze needs purifying. Ketch on?"

"Tell me," said Manchester, eagerly, "what was done here last night? Where is Mirabel Wayland?"

"Eloped with Gypsies."

"Escaped?"

"Yas."

"Thank fortune!"

"You don't seem to have got a ticket-of-leave."

"He wanted to," interrupted Tom Rounds. "He hammered on the door o' his rat-trap, but Dark John gave never a sign that he heard."

"Tell me all that has occurred," urged the attendant. "I am free to say that my sympathies are all with that innocent, unfortunate girl, and I would gladly aid her now."

"Tell him, if you wish, Tom, and then get him out of town."

With this curt order the ruler of Cottonwood Blaze left the court-room. Mr. Tom Rounds was not losing any temper over his hard usage of the night before; he had come to dislike Elbridge thoroughly, and was not sorry the latter's prey had escaped him, even at the expense of much physical inconvenience and divers aches on his own part.

He told the story clearly but briefly, and Manchester listened eagerly.

"Where do you think they are now?" the student then inquired.

"Where? They say the Gypsy pair wander in every wild place in the Nor'west. To the north of us is a region two hundred miles square, where man is skeerer than hen's teeth. I reckon the Gypsies an' the gal hev gone thar, an' it'll be a good man that kin find them."

"Thank you!"

With this brief acknowledgment Manchester abruptly left his companion. Making his way to the hotel at once, he addressed the landlord abruptly:

"Make out my bill, and have my horse brought to the door immediately."

CHAPTER VI. THE NIGHT WARNING.

LATE in the afternoon of the same day a horseman was making his way along a rough range of hills well to the north of Cottonwood Blaze.

The place was wild in the extreme. Rocks abounded, and were scattered over the ground in all forms from the smallest of bowlders to imposing cliffs, while the richness of the soil had produced an abundance of vegetation, and, in some places, lofty trees.

Still north of this range of broken hills a prairie could be seen which seemed to stretch to the limits of the Northwest: certainly, the end was not visible; but level places were scarce where the horseman was riding.

He was no stranger; it was Walter Manchester.

He paused on the summit of a rocky elevation and, shading his eyes with his hands, looked earnestly toward the East.

"I believe I can see them," he muttered, "and they are making better progress than I can. Confound the mistaken judgment which led me to take this course. I seem to be hopelessly hemmed in!"

He looked with manifest irritation at the country immediately in front of him. It has been said already that the way was rough, and he knew by adverse experience that it was hard to find chance for his horse to pass at any respectable rate of speed.

Since leaving Cottonwood Blaze he had persistently dogged Elbridge and his party in their pursuit of Mirabel and her Gypsy allies. Ben Bragg was something of a trailer, if his skill had failed on the way to the town; and, since leaving it, all things had been in his favor to an extent which made his labor easy.

Manchester kept at a safe distance, but had hung on the deputy-sheriff's track until, looking ahead when he stood on a ridge, he had seen three figures in advance, two of which were those of females.

Convinced that he was on the right track, he had tried to take a shorter route, so as to reach and warn them, but had become entangled in the hills.

At times he grew surprised at his own course. He knew Elbridge was an officer of law, and Mirabel a young woman accused of a heinous crime, yet, influenced wholly by the opinions

he had formed at the start, he was boldly seeking to aid her and defy the representative of law.

For one of his upright nature, he certainly was running much risk.

His last glimpse of Elbridge and his party, as indicated, had shown that they were making better progress than himself, and he was worried thereby. Speaking sharply to his horse he went on again, and the old struggle with the rough way was resumed.

The only consolation was that he was nearing the northern limit of the hills, but the sun went down and left him still wandering on in a devious course.

Gaining an elevated point, again, he determined to improve the last of daylight to view the country and see if any one was in sight. First, he watched for Elbridge's party, but failed to discover them. In another quarter he was more successful.

A faint shadow of smoke rising from a grove out on the prairie betrayed the presence of a camp-fire, and at the edge of the trees he saw a human figure, plainly that of a woman with a red shawl over her shoulders.

The discovery was enough to put him in motion again, at once. The camp of the Gypsies was found, and he had a chance to warn them if he could reach the place ahead of the deputy-sheriff's party.

He urged on his horse and gradually cut down the distance, but it was fully dark when he emerged from the hills. With a sigh of relief he hastened the speed of his steed, and the animal gladly broke into a gallop.

Manchester could see no light, but, having no trouble in distinguishing the spot he desired to reach, was soon nearing the grove. Not knowing what kind of a reception he might get he rode more slowly as he neared the trees, but it was not until he had entered their dark shades that he heard or saw a sound of life.

Then, before he suspected any manifestation, his horse was brought to a halt, and a man stood holding the rein.

Manchester waited in vain for him to speak, and had to take the initiative, himself.

"Hello, stranger!" he exclaimed.

"What are you doing here?" was the reply, in a low, deep voice.

"Riding for my health."

"This is not a healthy place."

"When one finds friends, it is."

"They are not easily found."

By this time Manchester had decided whom he was addressing.

"I seek a man named John."

"There is no one here who wants to see you. Turn back!"

"But I am a friend."

"Turn back!"

"In brief, John, I am come to warn you and the young lady you have in charge that her enemies are in pursuit of her."

It was a bold experiment, but the student had grown positive that Dark John was before him, and saw that he must convince the man. Thus far, while the Gypsy's voice was not raised, it was firm, and his manner as sullen and ungracious as ever.

"You talk wildly," was the reply.

"Is it wild to warn any one of danger?"

"Who are you?" was the abrupt inquiry.

"A man who slept in jail last night for Mirabel Wayland's sake; in brief, the Walter Manchester who hammered on his door last night, and asked you to rescue him when you took the girl away. Friend John—"

"I am no friend of yours!"

"At any rate, you will not refuse the information of a friend. If you have informed yourself in regard to the trouble at Cottonwood Blaze, you must be aware that I gave Miss Wayland my aid there and knocked down the man who used her so roughly—Elbridge."

"Come to the fire!"

Dark John spoke in his usual ungracious way, and then proved that he still felt a lack of confidence. Retaining his hold upon the rein of Manchester's horse, he led the animal further into the grove. It was much like the treatment usually given a captive, but Walter did not object.

An unexpected scene suddenly burst upon him.

He had supposed the timbered belt to be perfectly level, but through a part of it ran a depression which was, in substance, a miniature *barranca*, though the sides were nowhere impassable. In this depression burned a fire, and Manchester grew alarmed.

"If you value your safety, put out that blaze!" he exclaimed.

"You are not responsible for it."

"But think of the damage it may do—"

"I can do my own thinking."

Dark John was as ungracious as ever. He led the horse down the bank, and close to the fire, and Hagar came out of the shadows to look and listen. Walter looked eagerly for Mirabel, and did not fail to see, at one side, what looked to be a human figure lying—whether sleeping he could not tell—under blankets.

This might not be Mirabel, but he believed it was.

Dark John spoke again, and his swarthy face, upturned to Manchester's, was full of strength and impressive resolution.

"You have made a claim," he began. "Speak on and prove what you assert, if you can?"

"I can only tell in detail what I have sketched," the messenger replied. "If proof is had, it must come by seeking for the sheriff's party, or camping here in idleness until he finds you, and brings ruin to you."

The rover moved his rifle a little; a pantomimic answer that Walter did not fail to understand.

"Well?" John questioned.

"When it was discovered that Miss Wayland had escaped, Roger Elbridge was in a rage. He gathered his party and began the pursuit anew. He would have added other men to his force, but Mayor Doane would not allow any of his people to go. I had had trouble with Elbridge, as you may be aware, and I determined to do all I could to baffle the man. When he followed you, I followed him. He took your trail, and, with the aid of his guide, Ben Bragg, has followed it successfully. Just where he is now I don't know, but not distant—nay, he may be within a hundred yards of your camp now. My advice is that you awaken Miss Wayland and flee at once."

"She is not here."

"Not here?"

"No."

Manchester looked doubtfully at the recumbent form under the blankets.

"If you doubt me, put me to any test; keep me under any restraint deemed necessary."

"You can ride on," returned Dark John. "All your alleged concern interests me not, for it does not apply here. If you mean well, no harm is done; we need not quarrel. Ride on!"

"No!" Manchester exclaimed. "Once before it was my privilege to aid Miss Wayland, and I refuse to desert her now, when she needs my help more than ever. I am a stranger to her, but moved by that impulse which makes honest men the defenders of womanhood the wide world over, I ask for speech with the lady; if she then bids me go, I will obey her to the letter."

The blankets were flung aside, and Mirabel sprung to her feet. A few steps took her near to the speaker.

"I have heard all," she exclaimed, rapidly, "and feel sure I can trust you. I remember you well—remember how you interfered to protect me from a villain."

"Such was my good fortune."

"I feel sure you would not deceive me now."

"Before Heaven, I would not."

"Then advise me plainly. You say we are pursued?"

"Elbridge and his men are on your trail. I saw them last two miles back, headed for this camp. Where they are now I don't know; perhaps they are even now nearing this belt of timber."

Mirabel shivered and looked around with terror pictured in her large eyes.

"What is to be done?" she asked, nervously.

"I am not a borderman, but my judgment tells me you ought to move on, at once."

"Where?"

"Anywhere, except on the back-trail. Here, you have a blazing fire, and, though the depression and the arch of tree-tops makes the light invisible from the prairie, a pursuer has only to enter the timber to discover you."

Mirabel turned to Dark John.

"Friend, what are we to do?" she asked.

"You are your own mistress," was the sullen answer.

"But I look to you for advice."

"I am a clod. I know nothing; ask me nothing."

"But you are wise in prairie lore—"

"Ask me nothing!"

The wayward rover folded his arms and was as impassive as a rock, but Hagar, heretofore silent, now turned toward him and spoke. Her delivery was monotonous and her manner unreadable, and she used a language of which not a word was intelligible to Mirabel or Walter. That it was plain to John seemed certain, but, instead of giving visible heed to her, he gazed at vacancy, and was as impassive as a rock.

When she finished, however, he advanced to the fire and kicked the brands apart so they would soon die out.

"Prepare to move!" was his terse order.

Manchester breathed a sigh of relief. He was beginning to understand the rover's perverse nature somewhat, and felt that the victory was no mean one.

Hagar set a good example by gathering up their few worldly effects. Mirabel would have helped her, but a curt negative motion from the swarthy-faced woman led her to abandon the idea. She addressed Walter in an unsteady voice.

"Again I owe you gratitude."

"I am glad to help you."

"Have you heard my story?"

"I have heard Elbridge's."

"Few would aid one under such a ban."

"Accusation is not proof of guilt."

"May heaven bless you!" the girl exclaimed, gratefully. "Words cannot express how dear

such confidence is to me. I am unfortunate, and in adversity the world turns a deaf ear to truth, unless it is corroborated by a multitude of evidences. In my case, all is dark—dark! That you should think kindly of me is more to me than you can surmise. Thank you; thank you! May Providence send you as good a friend in your hour of need!"

She had almost broken down, and her tremulous voice so impressed the young man that, when she gave him her hand, he could hardly find words in which to reply.

"You can depend on me," he said, simply.

Dark John led the three horses forward, and Hagar deftly lifted the small store of personal property into place. Manchester hastened to make ready with his own animal, but the rover stopped all proceedings by a sudden command.

"Wait!" he directed.

All obeyed.

"I think others are in the timber!" he soon added.

CHAPTER VII.

THE COLLISION IN THE CANYON.

SILENCE fell upon the whole party. They stood close together, and the decaying light of the fire threw eccentric and moving gleams of light upon them. Mirabel held her breath in fear, while Manchester tried in vain to discover the cause of Dark John's alarm.

Nothing, however, was to be heard.

"Wait for me here," the rover soon added.

He ascended the bank on the south side of the camp and disappeared in the darkness. The silence was oppressive, and Mirabel unconsciously moved closer to Walter.

"Be at ease," he directed; "I will protect you!"

For a moment the rashness of the pledge presented itself to him fully. She was a fugitive from the law, accused of a murderous crime, and he had no more proof of her innocence than her assertion and his own impulsive opinion. Yet he, a law-abiding man, had promised to fight for her against the deputy-sheriff and his men.

Hagar stood like a rock. No turning of her head, or other motion, betrayed interest or anxiety, and Manchester had fresh evidence that the rovers were a strange couple.

Several minutes of this unpleasant silence and delay passed, and then Dark John returned.

"The enemy are near," he announced, calmly, "but we can probably make our way through them. For a time you and I will go on foot, one on each side, while the women move in the center. Here!"

Deftly grouping all of the horses but Mirabel's, he flung the bridle-reins to Hagar. She, understanding at a glance, mounted her own horse, which was in the middle, and was ready to move. Manchester assisted Mirabel to mount, and gave her another encouraging word.

"Come!" directed the rover.

"Is it the sheriff's party?" Walter asked.

"Ask no questions!"

The ungracious answer was not very agreeable from an ally, but Walter was learning to endure John's ways with as much philosophy as possible.

All ascended the bank at the north, and the retreat was begun. They moved as the rover had directed, and the younger man found great responsibility thrust upon him. Inexperienced in prairie-craft, he had, nevertheless, to act as scout, and that, too, without the help of advice or information from the surly leader. Coming from the light, the darkness now seemed of the blackest kind and he walked on with a feeling of helplessness.

Instinctively, he had cocked his rifle and was holding it ready for use, and so he moved, peering into the darkness and watching for the foe. Once, he mentally asked himself what he was to do if he saw the enemy. Use the rifle? Fire upon the officers of law?

The idea made him shiver, and he devoutly hoped he would not have to decide upon that point.

Suddenly there was a commotion at one side, and having become a little accustomed to the darkness, he turned and saw two men in close combat. For a brief time they writhed about, and then sunk to the ground. Utter silence followed. Manchester stood in the inactive uncertainty of one new to border life, but a single figure finally rose and went on calmly.

Dark John was the victor. What of his opponent?

Hagar had not been less observing than Manchester, and she had stopped the horses and, later, again started them with a skill and appreciation of time and opportunity which did her credit.

John and Walter reached the edge of the timber, and there the leader halted. All mounted, and the flight was resumed. For awhile the rover went at a moderate pace, but this was soon quickened and they rapidly receded from the grove.

Manchester was just thinking they must be out of sight of any one standing at that point when a bullet whistled close to his head, and the report of a rifle sounded.

"Run!" briefly directed John, setting the example.

"Where did that shot come from?" Walter asked.

"The timber."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Then we are discovered?"

"Yes."

The rover remained cool and unmoved, but not inactive. His horse was fleet and willing, as was Hagar's, and the other members of the party had no occasion to complain of want of energy. They had all they could do to keep up in the flight.

Taciturn and curt as the rover was, Manchester's anxiety led him to ride close to the guide and ask:

"What do you think of the prospect?"

"Nothing."

"I mean, are we likely to escape?"

"Perhaps."

"Sir, remember our interests are common. Can't you give me more direct replies?"

"The prairie is wide," answered Dark John, like a machine. "If you don't like my way, ride elsewhere!"

"By Jupiter! you are a most uncivil person!" Manchester exclaimed, exasperated beyond control.

"You are welcome to your opinion; I care not what it is."

"But the young lady—"

"Go to her. But for her you would waste no words on the dusky wanderer. Let him alone, now; he is not to be put on and off like a coat, at will. Let him alone!"

Chagrined and angry, Manchester fell back, but took John's advice so far as Mirabel was concerned. As they drew together she spoke in a low voice:

"You have spoken to the guide. I fear you gained but little satisfaction."

"None whatever. He is brief and uncivil to an extreme, and repulsed me unceremoniously."

"Bear with him. He and his wife are strange people, but perhaps repeated rebuffs from others have made them the rude, wayward beings they are. To me they have been very kind in act, if not in speech and glance. When I first saw them, as I rode toward Cottonwood Blaze, they were in their most surly mood, and refused to promise not to betray me to my foes. Yesterday they hardly ever addressed me, and then but briefly, but they were never unkind. Above all other facts ranks the great favor they did by rescuing me; it proves the existence of good hearts within them, and I am grateful—very grateful."

Manchester, smarting under his late rebuff, and remembering how Elbridge had abused and offended the rover at their first meeting on the trail, was very much of the opinion that the Gypsies had rescued Mirabel to be revenged upon the deputy-sheriff, but he kept his theory to himself.

"I have found another friend in you," the girl proceeded, with emotion, "and words are weak to tell how much I appreciate your goodness. When I arrived at Cottonwood Blaze I dared not go to a hotel. As I rode along the street I saw a kind-looking old lady and appealed to her for help, and not in vain. It was there you so bravely came to my rescue. I have told you this because I want you to know all about me."

She spoke with an appearance of frankness, but he could not forget that it was on the past that the light of explanation was most needed.

His reply was chivalrous, however.

"I have faith in you, and am glad to help you," he returned, briefly.

"You shall not regret it."

Again there was a startling interruption; a rifle-shot sounded, and Manchester was alarmed to notice how near the shot was. Turning, he saw four men riding toward them, dimly seen on a slight rise of ground, but not close enough for accurate shooting.

Falling back, Dark John produced some kind of a whip, or similar article, and unceremoniously lashed the other horses until all were running at full speed.

"We can't afford to creep, now," he asserted, in an aggressive manner.

Manchester resented this incident, but swallowed his anger and made no comment.

The race became earnest. The pursuers were doing their utmost, but would soon have been distanced had all the other horses been equal to those of the Gypsies. Mirabel and Manchester had poorer material, and it was an even race.

In this way rod after rod was passed until rods grew into miles, and Manchester began to fear that daylight would find the chase still on. It was all the worse for the fugitives that it was so silent a party. The Gypsies had nothing to say, and Walter's efforts to comfort Mirabel were rendered awkward by the fact that she was too much alarmed and confused to converse to any great degree.

A change came, and in a startling way.

Dark John, who was at the front, suddenly reined in his horse as they were passing through a long, narrow depression.

"We are in a trap!" he declared. "Look!"

Explanations were not necessary. The ravine had grown into a small canyon, with steep,

rocky sides, and, just ahead of them, it ended abruptly in a similar wall of rock.

It was nearly unscalable on all sides.

"What are we to do?" Walter demanded.

John did not answer.

"We shall have to abandon our horses and climb the rocks."

"Do you take me for a fool?"

"It is simply impossible for a horse to go up one of those cliffs."

"True, but where I go my horse goes, too. Boy, have you nerve?"

"Try me and see!"

"Just now, we are out of sight of the pursuers. The only way to escape them, though, is to turn back and, trusting to their surprise, run the gauntlet."

It was a bold and desperate scheme, the canyon being narrow, but Walter did not object—in fact, he saw no other way. They must take the chance or surrender tamely.

Dark John knew there was no time to be lost, and acted accordingly. Hastily turning the party about they soon were riding along the back-track, but keeping close to one of the cliffs, to screen their movements.

It was not long before the pursuers appeared in sight.

"Ride quietly until they give the alarm," the rover directed, "and then sink the spurs in your horse and ride for life. If any one molests you, strike him down!"

CHAPTER VIII.

RUNNING THE GANTLET.

NEARER came the pursuers, but discovery soon followed. When an exclamation from the enemy—plainly in Ben Bragg's voice—sounded, Dark John set the example and his horse sprung forward.

"Close in on them!" shouted Roger Elbridge. Unfortunately, it was possible to do this, and it was clear that a collision could not be avoided. Dark John did not try to avoid it. Silent as ever, he kept his direct course, and the shock followed.

The pursuers had felt too sure of their game to use their revolvers, but victory would have been nearer had they been used. John proved to be a veritable hurricane. He rode into them with full force, and suddenly swung his rifle as a club and struck out right and left. Every blow told, too, and he cut his way through.

The remainder of his party had followed closely. Earnest as he was in Mirabel's favor, Manchester had hoped to avoid striking any blow, but he was not to get off so easily.

Ceph Peters suddenly loomed up in his path, and the young man saw a revolver in the fellow's hand. There was no time to lose, and Walter thrust the breech of his rifle into Ceph's stomach with such success that the latter tumbled off his horse without a blow in return.

The gantlet was run, but trouble was not over. Severely as the enemy had been used, two of them remained in the saddle, and they started in pursuit again. Then John raised his rifle and fired twice. Skill or chance made his aim accurate, and horses and riders went down like magic.

"Ride for your lives!" the rover directed, with more force than usual.

The order was hardly needed, for all realized the need of haste, and all were urging their horses to the utmost. Manchester looked back, but the darkness prevented him from seeing anything more.

He remained in ignorance as to which had been John's target, men or horses; but the way the latter had dropped encouraged him to believe no human life had been taken.

The rover realized that the time had come to shake off the pursuers, and, as soon as the banks of the ravine grew sufficiently low, he took the party off to the right, and proceeded to execute a series of other maneuvers calculated to make escape more certain.

No more was seen by the deputy-sheriff's party, and when two hours more had passed, John suddenly halted in another timber-belt.

"We camp here, to-night," he announced.

"Is it safe to stop?" Walter asked.

"Would you have the horses at daybreak so they can not move a step?"

"The question is timely, and your way probably wise. I am with you, friend John."

The halt was duly made. The Gypsies remained as untalkative as ever while they were preparing for rest, while Mirabel was no sooner on the ground than she sunk down in a condition of utter weariness. Under these circumstances Manchester limited his own words to a few questions of John.

The latter declared it would be safe for all to sleep, and Walter decided not to oppose the plan. Wrapping himself up in his blanket he was soon in slumber.

Hours passed before he awoke, during which his rest was profound and most agreeable. When he opened his eyes it was fully day, and, more than that, the sun was shining. Quickly remembering the recent scenes he leaped up.

Then followed a singular discovery.

When he lay down all his companions had been close at hand, but none was then visible. As far as visible appearance went he might have

been the only human being within a hundred miles.

A chill fell upon him. The deserted camp looked lonely and gloomy, and it would have been most pleasant to see Mirabel appear. Again he looked around, and was rewarded by one discovery.

A pointed stick had been thrust upright into the ground, and from the end of this fluttered a fragment of white paper. He quickly secured it, and found thereon a few penciled lines in delicate writing.

He read as follows:

"MR. MANCHESTER:—Forgive me if I am unfeeling in appearance, for that I am not, at heart; but we are going a way to leave you. By daybreak we shall be many miles away, and it will be useless for you to follow us. Situated as I am, miserable and wretched, an exile from civilization, unjustly condemned and hunted as a criminal, I long for silence, solitude, oblivion. I am going away, and we never shall meet again. Don't blame me, for I am not so unfeeling as I seem. For all your noble acts, for all your goodness to me you have my earnest, never-ending gratitude. Farewell!"

"MIRABEL WAYLAND."

Manchester's expression was blank; he could hardly credit the truth, even yet.

He walked to the limits of the narrow belt of timber; the prairie was forsaken and vacant as far as he could see. Near at hand was his horse, not at liberty as it had been left, but tied to a limb.

Returning to the camp he sought for and found the trail. It left the timber and led almost due north. How long it had been made he could not tell, but it was significant that his horse had closely cropped all the grass within its reach.

Evidently, not less than two or three hours had elapsed since the departure.

Manchester smiled bitterly. He realized that the note was no hoax, and no vain statement; he was deserted. After all he had done for Mirabel she had given him the slip as if he was one not to be gotten rid of by any other means.

His gaze wandered to one clause in the note which, of all there, was most offensive:

"It will be useless for you to follow us."

"Follow!" he exclaimed, energetically. "I think I see myself doing it. I have not yet sunk so low. By Jove! though, this matter hurts my pride. In one sense I forced myself upon her—I practically insisted upon being her champion, and raced madly around to satisfy my ambition—and now she has given me a cut which makes me feel so small that twenty men of my supposed size could dance on the point of a needle!"

He flung the note down, and was about to grind it under his heel when he checked the impulse.

"Let not folly follow folly," he added; and picked the note up and put it in his pocket.

Accepting the inevitable he tried to be cheerful, and whistled a few lively notes. He turned his horse loose, and then, after making sure Roger Elbridge and his party were not at hand, looked to see what he had for breakfast.

It was not an abundant supply, but he ate it with good appetite. Then he lighted his pipe, saddled his horse and mounted.

"My friends of an abbreviated space of time have gone north," he observed, "so I'll ride west. Follow them? Well, not while I retain my usual senses. Beautiful Mirabel of marked record, silent Hagar and surly John, we have probably seen the last of each other. Good-day!"

He managed to find some humor in the situation. But all of his levity, real or assumed, could not hide the fact that harm had been done his pride and—his heart!

Shortly before noon Manchester saw the smoke of a camp-fire. He had ridden at moderate pace, and was so sure it was not that of the Gypsies that he determined to see who else was in the wild country.

Advancing, he soon had view of the campers. It was not a large party, as there were only two persons. Both were men, and both wore Western costumes, but Walter had been long enough in the border-land to see a marked difference in the couple.

"A veteran plainsman and a novice," he decided. "They look like honest men, and I'll join them."

He went forward, and was soon discovered by the supposed plainsman. Then both watched with careless curiosity which told that they had neither guilty nor cowardly fears of any man, friend or foe.

The plainsman saluted him blithely as he drew near.

"Hallo, stranger! what's the good word?"

"None, friend. I don't come from a news-center," Manchester returned.

"You've been there some time."

"What do you mean?"

"You're city bred."

"Right; but I trust that's not to my discredit?"

"Not an atom. Sech a man is ter be pitied, not blamed. Will you flop down an' loosen yer teeth on our fodder? Dinner is ready, an' thar's always room fer one more. Fill the stomach an' the mind's at ease. That's my motto, stranger."

"A good one, and, thanking you, I'm in the swim."

Manchester dismounted, freed his horse of all incumbrances, turned the animal loose, and then again gave his attention to his new acquaintances.

"Stranger," continued the spokesman, "let me introduce to you my friend, Doctor John Allenton. Your name I don't know from Napoleon's."

"It is Walter Manchester."

"Good! As fer me, I'm Hailstorm Harv, guide, hunter, scout—anything you please. I'm a fixture o' the North Plains, an' about as fine as they make 'em. You never'll hear me brag, but I'll whisper in a modest way that ef you kin find a man who is able ter shoot, ride, run or fight a notch above me, I'll show you a roarer that breathes fire an' brimstone from one nostril, an' sulphur an' small-pox from the other. Ketch my drift?"

The speaker was easy to understand, if his statement had been involved, and Manchester saw he was one of the talkative, hearty, boastful men whom he had not found uncommon on the prairie.

He had a frank and jolly way, however, that made amends for minor drawbacks, and Manchester shook hands with both him and the doctor.

"You will see from friend Harvey's description," observed the latter, with a grave smile, "that he and I make a business pair. He makes knife and gunshot wounds; I cure them."

"The Doc kin do that, sure, but shoot!—why, Lord love yer, when he takes aim his gun wobbles like a primer-donner's voice. Yes, by mighty!"

Hailstorm Harv laughed heartily, but suddenly made a rush for the fire, where the half-prepared dinner needed attention, and Manchester sat down and awaited the result with deep interest. He was a hungry man.

On this occasion he knew he had fallen among persons of honest bent of mind.

The eccentric individual who gave the name of Hailstorm Harv was less than thirty years of age. He lacked only two inches of being six feet in height, and was broad-shouldered and muscular. He had a round, rosy face, smoothly-shaven except for a blonde mustache. Good humor was visible all over that face, and indicated that the traces of recklessness also pictured there would never go to an evil extreme.

Dr. Allenton was a very different man. Like Manchester, he had the stamp of city life upon him. His face was grave, earnest, intelligent and strong, and his large eyes were the typical eyes of a physician. His dark hair had a liberal sprinkling of gray, but he was strong and healthy of appearance.

When Manchester first heard the doctor's name he recognized something familiar about it, but failed to remember where he had heard it before.

He made no effort to learn.

Dinner being prepared the trio partook together. Idle as much of Hailstorm Harv's talk was, Manchester found him a pleasant companion, and was not long in deciding that he would be glad to remain in his company, but something occurred after dinner which changed the young man's opinion greatly.

All sat down to smoke. Manchester and Harv had pipes, but the doctor took a cigar from his pocket. As he did so an envelope came out, also. Walter was about to call his attention to it, when Allenton himself picked the envelope up, folded it, used it as a cigar-lighter, and then flung the unconsumed part away.

The observer noticed that this was done mechanically, the doctor seeming to be in deep thought.

When they had finished smoking, the guide attended to some work in the camp, while Allenton went a few yards away and began to pace back and forth with lowered head and abstracted manner.

"A person with something on his mind," thought Walter. "It seems to rest heavily, too."

His gaze wandered and chanced to encounter the half-burned envelope. Some of the writing which had formed the address was plainly visible, and certain peculiarities caused him to pick it up quickly and unfold it fully.

The left-hand end, only, had been consumed, and on the other portion three words seemed to flash upon the reader. The first was "Allenton," the rest of the name being gone; the second was "Liberty;" the third, "Montana."

It was a startling revelation to Manchester. The writing was Mirabel's, and it only needed the town-name of Liberty to make him know in a twinkling where he had heard Dr. Allenton's name before.

He was the physician mentioned in Roger Elbridge's story, as told at Cottonwood Blaze, and Walter knew that Fate had strangely brought him into association with Mirabel's discarded lover of former days.

"No wonder the man has a cloud upon his mind," thought the young man, bitterly. "He has tasted of her ways more fully than I. He made the fatal error of falling in love with a woman many years younger than himself, but

that was no reason why she should throw him over so unceremoniously. But was the blame all' with her?"

He regarded the grave man of medicine, and a thrill of jealousy went over him. Of jealousy? Yes: for, while he had before flattered himself that he felt Mirabel's recent flight only because it was, on the surface, ungrateful, he knew, at last, that he was more deeply interested in her than he had thought.

"The blame may all be with Allenton. But what shall I say of her treatment of me? Am I in the same boat with the doctor? Never; I want nothing to do with him; I'll have nothing to do with him!"

Hailstorm Harv approached.

"Walt, you're alone on the prairie. Won't you join us? Camping-room is abundant, an' I like your style. What say?"

Manchester checked the curt negative that was on his lips, and diplomatically replied:

"If I were able to choose, I should be glad to travel with you, but I can't please myself in this. I thank you heartily, but I'll leave you to-morrow morning."

"I'm sorry, old man."

"So am I, but I've got to go."

CHAPTER IX.

A SINGULAR ENCOUNTER.

EIGHT months have passed since the scenes previously described; the snows of winter have come and gone, and been succeeded by the month of June.

A rifle-shot in the hills caused a horseman to tighten the rein and come to a full stop. There were rumors of a hostile spirit among the Indians who dwelt not far away, and a shot was a matter not to be regarded as trivial.

The horseman was Walter Manchester. Eight months, however, had changed his appearance considerably. The slight pallor of over-study had given place to the brown hue of health, and he had much the appearance of a borderman old in experience.

Failing to see any explanation of the shot he rode on and neared the vicinity where it had been fired. He soon reached a miniature canyon and went along a natural road which was smooth and sandy.

Suddenly his horse erected its ears and gave earnest attention to the front, and Walter, looking in the same direction, saw a human form at the foot of the rocks. The unknown, who lay silent and motionless, was of boyish figure. A rifle lay by his side, and a vine twisted around one ankle, plainly told of a helpless fall from the rocks above and consequent unconsciousness.

"A mere child!" Manchester exclaimed; "he seems not to be over sixteen, and with strength more appropriate to an age three years less than that. A handsome boy, too, though his dark skin and straight, black hair tell of Indian blood. A half-breed, of course, which may mean he's the son of a hostile; but I won't allow one so young to suffer for want of friendly care."

Dismounting, he went to the stream near at hand, brought water and was about to begin ministrations, when a sigh passed the boy's lips. He opened his eyes, looked around wonderingly, and then languidly rose to his elbow.

He had not seen Walter, and his gaze turned upward to the summit of the rocks.

"I fell like a wooden-man!" he exclaimed, petulantly.

"I trust you are not injured?"

Manchester put the question in a kind voice, though not because he supposed that a half-breed would have any delicacy of feeling or nerve. He was naturally sympathetic, and the singular beauty of the boy grew upon him.

The result of his question was surprising.

The boy turned his head swiftly, gave one look, and then sprung up in alarm. He stood for a moment gazing at the hunter, and then the color noticeably fled from his dark cheeks. He sunk down upon a boulder, and his continued terror led Walter to wonder if, on account of trouble between white men and red, he expected to be dispatched at once.

"Be calm!" the hunter urged. "You shall not be injured or molested."

There was no answer.

"Do you speak English?" added the inquirer.

The boy's lips moved, and he managed to falter:

"Yes."

"Then understand that you are safe. I was riding past and chanced to observe you lying unconscious, so I brought water to revive you. Possibly you are still weak and confused. Allow me to bathe your temple and—"

"No, no!" the boy exclaimed.

"Are you so much Indian as to be afraid of water?"

"I don't need it."

"You ought to know best. I take it you fell from the rocks?"

"Yes."

"Is this your rifle?"

"Yes, sir."

"Who fired, recently?"

"It was I, sir."

Manchester glanced at the boy's slender figure and unconsciously smiled.

"Like all Indians, I suppose you are a great hunter."

"Suppositions are cheap," retorted the boy, with more spirit.

"Not badly answered; it is none of my business whether you are or not. Are you injured by your fall?"

"I think not."

"Move around a little, and try your bones and muscles!"

"Presently, sir."

"What is your name?"

"Asher."

"A very Scriptural name, upon my word. Are you more Hebrew than Indian? and, if so, where are Reuben, Simeon, Gad, and the rest of the children of Israel?"

"You talk in riddles, sir."

"And foolishly, too, I admit. Do you live near here?"

"At times."

"Where is your tribe?"

"Perhaps they can be found by searching."

The boy was gaining fluency and diplomacy of speech wonderfully, but his fear had not abated. He regarded Manchester much as a frightened deer would, and his black eyes seemed preternaturally large. The hunter believed that a trifle would frighten him into a panic, but had no disposition to act upon the weakness of even a half Indian.

Accepting the last rebuff philosophically, he asked:

"Shall I accompany you home?"

"It is not necessary."

"As you will; but, before I go, rise, move around and make sure you are not crippled."

"I—I prefer to sit here," faltered Asher.

"Upon my word! Do you take pleasure in it? How long do you intend to sit? You should be a Turk!"

The boy's face flushed.

"Like most Americans, you delight in ridiculing the unfortunate," he returned, with hesitating utterance.

"Wrong, boy! I wish to ridicule no one and bear you only good will. Neither have I any wish to force my company upon you. I, however, am older than you, and I maintain that 'tis only common prudence when I ask you to ascertain whether you are injured before I leave. Prove you're not, and I'll go. Get up and move about!"

Asher obeyed, though with ill grace. He took one step, he tried to take a second, but sunk down and would have fallen to the ground had not the hunter caught him.

"As I suspected, a fracture or a sprain. Where is it?"

"My ankle," faltered the boy.

"A sprain, doubtless. It must be treated promptly with water and whisky. The first is here; the second, in my pack. Remove your moccasin—"

He had glanced down, but paused as he saw the delicacy of that foot. A growing boy almost always has abnormally large pedal extremities, but Asher's were strikingly small and symmetrical.

It was Asher, himself, who broke the silence.

"No, no!" he exclaimed; "I shall do very well. I beg that you will let me look out for myself."

"Have you a horse near?"

"No."

"And your village, home, or whatever it is; how far away?"

"Perhaps two miles."

"Enough! I am no brute to leave a crippled youngster in this wild place. Destructive animals and lawless men of both colors are all one can expect to meet, and one of the former would dispose of you in the twinkling of an eye. You are going home on my horse, with me for a protector."

He called to his four-footed friend, who came without delay.

"Now, let me lift you to the saddle—"

Again Manchester paused, but it was because the deep color of concentrated blood was showing so strikingly in Asher's dusky cheeks. A girl could not have blushed more fully, though, perhaps, more appropriately.

"A queer boy, by Jupiter!" the hunter muttered.

The handsome boy became determined.

"I am not aware that you are my master, sir!" he declared, with spirit. "I don't object to you having freedom of movements; to your goings or your comings. I am as free as you, and I intend to remain so. Plan for yourself, sir; you cannot plan for me. I intend to remain here as long as I wish. That will be until you are gone; how much longer, I can't say. Should you prove of lawless nature, I am amply able to defend myself!"

He touched a dagger which was thrust in his belt, and tried to assume an air as warlike as his words, but Manchester saw only the ridiculous side of the matter.

"My lad, when your fifteen years have increased to thirty, and your puny arm to that of a man, look back at this occasion and laugh at your folly—if you live until that day. I regard

you as a foolish child, but you shall have your own way. I'll leave you alone."

He turned away and was about to mount his horse, but, at that moment, other footfalls reached his ears, and he wheeled and saw another rider only a few yards distant—so near that only the sand of the gulch had prevented his approach being heard before.

Then followed a discovery.

The new-comer was Dark John, the rover!

For a moment Manchester said nothing. In the eight months which had elapsed since John and his companions so unceremoniously left Walter alone in the camp in the timber, the latter had not seen or heard of them. The Gypsy had been far from the hunter's thoughts at this precise moment, yet there he was.

Manchester recovered from his surprise.

"How are you, John?" he coolly inquired.

The rover nodded coldly, but the glances he was shooting around, directed as they were alternately at Walter and Asher, were indicative of some feeling on his part akin to that which other men might feel.

He made no reply, however.

"Don't you remember me?" the hunter added.

"Yes," John returned, calmly.

"You ran away from me on the prairie."

"Yes."

Wholly unmoved, the Gypsy addressed Asher: "Mount behind me, and we will go to camp."

"So you know the boy?" Walter asked.

"Yes."

"He seems more Indian than white."

"He is neither."

"What, then?"

"He is my son."

Manchester surveyed the boy with fresh interest. The swarthy complexion and black hair suddenly assumed new meaning.

"Strange I did not suspect it before, but I didn't know you were a parent. You didn't have the lad with you before—but, of course you did not. So he is your son. I thought I saw something familiar about him."

Again Asher blushed.

"Mount behind me!" John ordered, sharply.

"I can't; I've sprained my ankle," faltered Asher.

"I will lift him."

Manchester took a forward step, but the rover suddenly sprung to the ground, pushed the hunter aside, and then lifted the dusky-faced boy into place without ceremony. Asher winced, showing that motion gave pain to the injured ankle, but endured it without a word of complaint. Dark John quickly mounted in front of him, and was riding away without another word to the hunter when the latter spoke boldly:

"I am going with you, and will ride in your company."

"Do not trouble yourself," John returned, in the old, ungracious way.

"It will be no trouble; I can easily keep you in sight. This time I am not asleep, and shall not be left hungry and without food. Ride on, rover; you will find me right beside you. I always did like good and cheerful company."

CHAPTER X.

THE HANDSOME GYPSY.

MANCHESTER'S manner was very quiet, despite the sarcasm of his words, but he did not have the best of feeling toward Dark John. During the winter he had often thought of the rover, of Hagar, and—of Mirabel, but had never made any effort to find them. He had been in other border towns, but never in Cottonwood Blaze since that eventful occasion of the fall.

Chance had again brought him into John's company, and the long-harbored resentment was not to be satisfied without a blow in return. The Gypsy did not want him, but the prairie was free to all, and he resolved to worry the swarthy man somewhat.

The latter's sullen face gave no clew to his thoughts, but he abruptly answered:

"Indians are on the war-path again."

"So I hear."

"They are near here."

"Any hope of a fight?"

"We are liable to be attacked at any moment."

"Good! You and I ought to be able to do good execution."

"Suppose you ride one way, and I the other. I like to go alone."

This curt announcement was to the point, but Asher now broke silence in impulsive speech:

"The stranger has been kind to me, Father John. Why not invite him to our camp-fire?"

The horsemen were proceeding through the gulch abreast, and Walter, turning quickly at these words, caught a peculiar expression upon the boy's face. It was very much like remorse, and indicated that Asher might be sorry for his own incivility.

"As you wish," the rover coldly replied.

"I suppose your good wife is with you?" Walter asked.

"She is."

"And the girl?"

"Gone!"

"A great loss to you. No doubt you sit up nights grieving over her departure. How could

she do it? and she so careful of wounding others' feelings!"

Manchester was sorry for his sarcasm as soon as it was uttered for he wished Dark John to suppose him wholly indifferent to that night flight and to Mirabel. What John now thought was not to be known, but, had the speaker turned his head, he would have seen Asher's face again of deep red. Anxious to prevent any comments in regard to Mirabel, Walter quickly added:

"You are some distance from the settlements this season."

"I trapped and hunted all winter," explained John, with unusual communicativeness, "and then took my peltries to market in early spring. This summer I shall pass on the prairie, but expect to go far north in a day or two."

Walter suspected this was a further hint that he could not long abide with the party, but, at this moment, they reached a point where the ridge sloped to the prairie, and the view took up all of his attention.

He was on the highest land for many miles around, and, away to the northwest, he saw a prairie scene of great beauty. Plain, valley, stream and scattered trees were there, and he did not wonder that one like Dark John had made his home there. The most ambitious of legitimate settlers had never yet dreamed of planting a town in the vicinity, and the time when it would be done seemed far away.

Descending the slope, the trio started across the prairie.

The rover had suddenly grown less silent and curt. He conversed with Walter, and not without some courtesy. From him genial words and tones were not to be expected, but it was no mean point gained when he condescended to drop venomous words and surly reserve.

Asher said nothing. He sat behind John and held his rifle gracefully. If his ankle gave him pain he made no complaint. Manchester almost forgot the youth while listening to the rover, who corroborated all the former had heard concerning the Indian troubles. Incited by lawless white men, the red-skins were roaming about restlessly, some deeds of bloodshed had been charged to them already, and others were likely to follow.

While talking they had entered a grove of lofty trees, and, suddenly, Walter saw a little hut. That it was John's was certain, for tall and bony Hagar stood by the door.

As they neared her she looked sharply at the riders, and the expression on her masculine face did not indicate any degree of pleasure. Walter, however, bowed like a courtier.

"Here I am again, Mrs. Hagar!" he declared.

"You see, I couldn't keep away."

"A bad penny always returns," retorted the woman.

"And birds of a feather flock together."

Unabashed by his reception the hunter dismounted and proceeded to make himself at home. He did not try to act the Samaritan toward Asher again, but let Dark John attend to his tribe. Once more the rover lifted the boy; then he carried him into the hut. As he passed Hagar he muttered a few low words, whereupon she followed.

By the time Manchester had his horse turned loose John came out dropping a blanket over the entrance.

"Time has not changed you much since we met last," remarked Walter, willing to be civil.

"Nothing changes on the northwest prairie."

"How about matters when red-men seek scalps?"

John touched his rifle.

"I don't fear them."

"But your wife and the boy—"

"Are very well!"

The rover interrupted with much of his old rudeness, but his companion was not to be discouraged.

"Speaking of the boy reminds me of the girl who was with you last year. Do not misconstrue my motives when I inquire for her. She saw fit to throw me over entirely, and I never want to see her again, but her situation was then so critical that I would like to ask—"

"She is dead!"

"Dead?"

"Yes."

"But you told me she had gone home—at least, so I understood you to mean, though you did not say it plainly, I believe."

"I did not. She went with friends, after escaping her pursuers, but contracted a fever and died."

If Manchester had believed this statement fully he would doubtless have felt fresh pity for the beautiful victim of the autumn adventures, but, thinking Dark John was to be relied upon only when proof went with his assertions, he took the statement with a grain of allowance.

"Did you ever hear her story in full?"

"No."

"Do you think she was innocent?"

"I never considered the point."

The rover walked away abruptly, and began to busy himself about some trivial duty.

"You wear the mask of silence well," muttered Walter, "but do not command ready belief."

The hunter sat down and fell into thought. This meeting had brought back scenes he had tried to forget, and the influence of Mirabel was upon him. Living or dead, she had been a woman of beauty, grace and outward refinement beyond the average of her sex.

He did not then pause to consider his own future, but the question must soon come. How long was he to remain with Dark John? He was not welcome there; neither the rover nor his wife, nor Asher, wanted him around. He was of a proud and independent spirit, to a proper degree, and if he long remained it would be to have a measure of satisfaction for his treatment in the past.

Finally he aroused from thought and looked around. Hagar had come out of the hut, and, joining John, was talking earnestly, while Asher sat by the door. The beauty of the boy appealed more than ever to Manchester, and he rose and walked to his side.

Asher looked as if he wished to flee, but, with his injured ankle, had the best of reasons for remaining.

"How do you feel now?" the hunter asked, kindly.

"Very well, sir," was the faint reply.

"Does the sprain prove to be serious?"

"No, sir."

"Can you walk?"

"A little."

"Gypsy-like, I suppose you dislike to give up?"

"Yes, sir."

"Have you been long on the prairies?"

"Yes, sir."

The monotonous style of these answers grew unpleasant to the questioner, and more than ever marked Asher as a strange lad. Walter had seen Gypsies all the way from Massachusetts Bay to the Rocky Mountains, but never before a diffident Gypsy. Male and female, as far as he knew them, were bold, ready of speech, free of manner and sharp of retort. Yet, Asher was as timid as a young deer, and seemed actually afraid of his would-be friend.

"You were not with your parents last year."

"Not all the time, sir."

"They had another companion, then."

"Did they?"

"I refer to the young lady. Did you see her?"

Asher blushed like a love-lorn maiden.

"I believe so, sir; I am quite sure I did."

"Did she seem happy?"

"I did not notice."

"You can not be a great admirer of ladies."

"I am not, sir. To change the subject, are you a borderman, or only a traveler?"

Walter smiled at the question, for it was not asked as if Asher had any interest in the matter. Like the rest of the strange party the boy was evidently averse to talking about Mirabel. The hunter let the subject drop, and gave his own reply as fully as any questioner could desire.

At this point Dark John and Hagar advanced toward the hut with more haste than seemed necessary, and the former at once began speaking with more volubility than he ever had manifested before in Walter's presence.

The latter had a good chance to see the trio together, and what his observing eyes discovered caused him fresh wonder. From the first he had taken the statement that Asher was a son of the couple with some mental reservation, and his doubts could not but increase when he saw them together.

Except for the general swarthiness of complexion there was no resemblance between the boy and his companions. True, his hair was as black as theirs, but it was fine of texture and bright, while theirs was coarse and lusterless. Both John and Hagar were tall, gaunt and bony, and the woman was about as muscular and masculine looking as the man.

Moreover, they had coarse, angular faces, which could boast of no higher order of intelligence than cunning—of which they had an abundance. Asher's features were very delicately molded, regular and becoming, and, besides high intelligence, his face expressed refinement of equal degree. He was a remarkably handsome boy, too, while their faces were grim, homely and blank.

"He is not of their blood," the hunter thought, "though he may believe he is. Who and what is he? Gypsies, it is universally charged, are noted for abducting children of tender years. Is this Asher's history?"

If so, it was not then explained.

Contrary to expectations, Walter continued to be civilly treated by each of the trio, though Asher avoided conversation. John and Hagar could not have changed their natures greatly if they had tried, but no more surly words were thrown at the hunter.

He was not invited to remain, but their manner gave a kind of acquiescence in the matter, and he did not speak of leaving. During the day his companions several times had earnest conversations at a distance from him, but the subject, or subjects, of discussion were not made known.

When supper had been eaten Dark John took up his rifle.

"We change our camp to-night," he observed.

"Prepare to move."

Then, catching Walter's inquiring gaze, he added:

"We are not safe here. Indians and white outlaws are near. To-morrow we must rest twenty miles away."

CHAPTER XI.

SEARCHING FOR A BEAUTIFUL GIRL RIDER.

A FEW days later two men pitched their camp in a grove at the base of the mountains, near Turnabout Creek.

"It's a tolerable place for man an' beast," remarked one, "an' ef the red-skins show up we kin retreat ter the hills. Not that I generally run when a measly red pokes his nose inter my business, but you say you're a man o' peace, Doc, an' yer warble goes."

"I'm not a man-hunter, Hailstorm Harv."

"I be, Doc, an' I like it. Why, ef I'd lived in old times I'd been the greatest Injun demolisher on two legs, but times is run down an' gone ter seed. Injun drink whisk' an' don't go on the war-path. Thar ain't much fightin', Doc, but when I do git a swipe at 'em I tell yer thar is a fatal sickness among the disciples o' Tecumseh. Bet yer skulpel an' other carvin' knives on that!"

The speaker was Hailstorm Harv, the guide, and the same old Harv at that. The passing months had not changed his physical appearance, or brought to light a falling-off in his powers of speech.

Once more his companion was Dr. John Allenton, but the latter had not wintered on the northern prairies. Instead, he had been comfortably housed through it all, and only joined Harv again when life on the plains became agreeable.

There were some who wondered that one of the doctor's age, profession and scholarly nature should find pleasure in such a life, but they did not know of the affair at Liberty which had troubled him so much, and made him so much of a cynic. He no longer liked the society of his fellow-men as a whole, but found Hailstorm Harv and Nature companions worth mingling with.

On this occasion Harv proceeded to establish himself and Allenton in camp in his usual impetuous manner. He worked as he talked, in a rush; and even in such a matter all things had to bow to his will except the fire. That took its time.

The guide was a rare cook, and when they sat down to eat there was something substantial for their appetites.

"Ever eat roast Injun, Doc?" Harv asked, as he filled his mouth to overflowing.

"Never!"

"I'm tol' no city table in St. Louis or Denver keeps that feed on sale."

"Which is probably true."

"Injun is good eatin'. I never tried it, nor known any white man who did, but I've seen grizzlies fill up that way an' then sleep as peaceful as a rattle in winter. The grizzly roasted th' feed afore a fire as well as you or me could."

If the guide felt any remorse for this story it did not affect his appetite, which continued good long after Doctor Allenton was satisfied. When Harv had finished he went to the edge of the grove to take a precautionary survey of the prairie, but almost immediately beckoned to the doctor to join him.

"Visitors comin'," he announced, as Allenton arrived.

Four men were riding toward the timber, but they were not Indians. This did not prove they were friends, for white outlaws and vagabonds were as dangerous as red-skins.

"You can meet them," remarked Allenton, curtly. "I don't want to make their acquaintance."

"You do quite right, ef I am correct as ter the two burly critters who ride at the front. They look uncommon like Ben Bragg an' Ceph Peters —two as big knaves as walk these northern acres."

"Do you anticipate trouble?"

"I reckon not."

"Then I'll return to the camp, for I am averse to meeting any one; you know my way. But if you need any help—poor though it may be—you know I am with you."

"All right, Doc."

Allenton walked away. His aversion to society was well known to the guide, and occasioned no thought then. Harv continued to watch the other riders.

"Bragg an' Peters, sure," he muttered, "Them who ride with the pair are good dressers, but why should decent men want ter herd with Ben and Ceph? I don't go no great shakes on the two-leggers in good clo'se."

Concealed by bushes Harv awaited their coming. He had not been seen by them, and doubted if they knew any one was in the timber, though they ought to have discovered the smoke of the camp-fire. Had it been easy to avoid them he would have done so, but discovery would follow as soon as they reached the grove.

It was just as well to remain.

Not until they were about to enter the timber did the guide reveal himself. Then he quietly

walked out into view, his rifle thrown carelessly across his arm. There was no great amount of good-will between him and the other borderers, and the nature of his reception was uncertain, but he was a man without fear.

Discovery was soon followed by a shout from Ben.

"Hi! hyer's another o' the wild hosses o' the plains!" he cried. "Hello, Hailstorm Harv, you long-legged loper an' grizzly-tickler, how's yer shrunk arms an' swellin' heart?"

Harv nodded coldly to the boisterous speaker.

"I'm all right," he returned, curtly.

"Gents," added Bragg, turning to the third and fourth members of the party, "this is Hailstorm Harv, the boss guide an' scout o' Montana."

"Gammon!" muttered Harv. "Ben hez an ax ter grind!"

One of the well-dressed men rode forward and shook the guide's hand cordially.

"I'm glad to meet you, sir," he declared.

"Are you in camp here?"

"Yes."

"Is there room for us?"

"The prairie is free ter all, I reckon."

"All quiet hereabouts?"

"Yes."

"Have you seen other riders?"

"No."

"Were you on these prairies in winter and spring?"

"I was, that."

"Then let me ask you a question. I've heard a story, which may be all a wild fabrication, and would like to verify or disprove it. I'm not a borderer, and may be a little skeptical. I find that stories of this, that and the other kind are always floating around among the hunters, some of which seem to be more imaginative than probable. The latest is romantic. Rumor says that, on several occasions in winter and early spring, a beautiful white girl was often seen up in these northern regions. She rode a fine horse and carried a rifle, and appeared to be a novelty. Although white, she was tricked out in Indian garments suitable to her sex, and the stories tell of her dainty, moccasined feet, fine hair and form, and lovely face. Ben Bragg believes all this, but I—well, I'm a practical man, friend Harv, and I find it desirable to have proof before I believe. Have you seen this girl rider?"

The speaker assumed a light, careless air, and smiled as though he had no real interest, but the guide was not deceived.

He knew the man was very much in earnest.

"I can't help you out. I ain't seen any such critter."

"It seems absurd to me."

"Ef true, the gal was likely to freeze off her pooty toes."

"Have you heard the rumor?"

"Yes."

"Do you believe it?"

"No!"

Harv had never given the matter much thought, and did not know whether he was a believer or not, but was not inclined to please the questioner.

The latter's face fell.

"What should a girl be doing in this wild region?" he added, keeping up his argument.

"Dunno," replied Harv, grimly; "but ef it's true, should say she was coolin' off them aforesaid toes."

"The affair is so novel that I'd willingly give twenty-five dollars for a sight at her. Can you win the money?"

"Ef not paid by the hour, I reckon I'd lose money by the venture. I wouldn't know whar ter look fer the gal rider, an' she may be a spirit—an angel ridin' around ter git facks and figgers on us wicked hunters. No; I allow I don't want the job, but Ben and Ceph is jest your chaps for an angel hunt. Birds of a feather flock together!"

It was not a very gracious remark, but Bragg and Peters, who, in days past had shown cordial dislike for the guide, pretended to be greatly amused and laughed in concert until the sound was a roar.

"Harvey is the jew's-harp fer a joke," finally stammered Ben, wiping his eyes.

"Can't say the same fer you, by mighty! Your tongue is too limber an' not half mellifluous enough."

"We are about to have dinner," interposed the man who was interested in the beautiful girl rider, "and if you don't object, we'll use your fire, the smoke of which I see yonder. Let me introduce myself and friend. I am Roger Elbridge, of the town of Liberty, and a deputy sheriff. My friend is Jonas Chapin, also of Liberty, and a lawyer."

Not at all awed by the grandeur of these titles, Harv again nodded shortly. Elbridge then added the direct question whether they could go to the camp-fire, and, seeing no reason why he should object, the guide, answered affirmatively.

As they approached that spot Doctor Allenton was to be seen sitting by a tree, but, as his back was partially toward them, he and the newcomers gained their first distinct view of each other when separated by only a few feet.

It was not until the last moment that he

looked. When he did Elbridge and Chapin were regarding him in surprise, and, as he slowly rose, a deeper cloud overspreading his face, the deputy-sheriff advanced with extended hand, but with manifest hesitation.

"Bless me, doctor, is it you?" he exclaimed.

"Why, I didn't expect to see you here."

Allenton disregarded the extended hand with superb unconsciousness and cold composure.

"Even sheriffs come here," he stiffly responded.

"And lawyers," added Chapin. "Allenton, you don't seem glad to see us."

"I'm not!"

"You and I were once friends."

"Don't mention it. Now, I am ashamed of my judgment in those days."

Jonas flushed visibly.

"Then we meet as enemies, do we?"

"We meet as strangers!" returned Allenton, turning away.

CHAPTER XII.

THE FIGHT ON THE PRAIRIE.

No rebuff could be more decisive, but Chapin was not to be discouraged so easily.

"Why, confound it! don't be so impolite, doctor, I never did you any harm."

"You never had a chance," Allenton coldly responded.

"Then why do you snub me?"

"We need not discuss the matter."

"If it is the matter of—"

Sheriff Elbridge touched the lawyer's arm warningly, and Chapin took the hint and let the sentence rest.

"We were fellow professional men at Liberty," he added, "and I don't see why we cannot pull together now."

"I have no wish to quarrel."

"Hang it all!" exclaimed Ben Bragg, "this is a waste of words. Grub goes ahead o' words, any day, so le's fall to an' vuctual up the interior department. My engine needs coal, an' needs it bad."

The new-comers began preparations for dinner, while Allenton again sat down by the tree and devoted his attention to his pipe. Averse as he was to society, and to that of these men in particular, he would not give them the satisfaction of thinking he had been driven away; he determined to remain at the camp as long as he wished.

Hailstorm Harv had no clew to the meaning of the last scene, and the doctor gave him no chance to receive or make explanation; but he noticed that Elbridge and Chapin soon drew together for conversation. Chapin began, and tried to deceive the spectators by pointing and looking at the trees, but he did not blind Harv. The latter knew it was a secret conference, but, not knowing he had any reason to act the listener, did not try anything of the kind.

"Elbridge," remarked Jonas, "we have put our foot in it."

"How?"

"We spoke to the guide about the beautiful girl rider of the prairie, and he will tell Allenton."

"I have thought of that."

"Once let the doctor get this clew, and he will be shrewd enough to suspect the rest."

"You put it too strongly. We know that the description of this rider tallied with Mirabel's looks; but how will he know it? Any daring girl might fill the role of the beautiful rider."

"Ah; but when Allenton knows you and I are hunting for the rider, he will be a dullard not to catch at the truth in a twinkling."

"I admit all that. But why should he be interested in Mirabel? She gave him the grand razzle-dazzle, and he can't feel any great good-will for her."

"Allenton is one of those nondescript men who bank heavily on 'honor,' so called—which means that he would be chivalrous to his enemies if he did mangle his own toes. It would be just like him to try and block our game."

"Well, we can't buy Hailstorm Harv's silence, so we shall have to keep in and see if we can collar the jack-pot."

The conspirators separated, and both occasionally addressed Harv and Allenton, but no more cordial relations were established.

The new-comers had dinner, and then prepared to go. It was very apparent that they were not welcome in the grove, and the leaders were perfectly willing to drop Dr. John Allenton then and there. They said good-day to him, stiffly, and without running the risk of having their hands refused again. Then Bragg led the way to the edge of the grove.

"The air begins ter purify!" quoth Harv, thinking of Ben and Ceph.

"Right!" Allenton agreed, thinking of Elbridge and Chapin.

"Hello! what now?"

The receding riders had halted, and, talking with some excitement, were looking out on the open prairie. Then Ceph Peters galloped toward the camp.

"Injuns!" he announced.

"Snakes in the boots!" answered Harv, facetiously.

"I tell yer they're thar; red an' whites; an' ef it ain't a war-party I'm a liar. They're comin' this way, too. Mebbe your skulp ain't of any use ter you, but mine is."

By this time all of Ceph's companions were hurrying back, and the guide was not stubborn enough to act with folly. He called to the horses and made them ready for departure in short time.

"An ugly-lookin' gang," observed Ben Bragg, as he and his friends came up. "I'm no downy chicken, but I don't hanker ter tackle too much dynamite."

Ceph had galloped to the opposite side of the timber. He now returned at full speed.

"Say, pilgrims!" he cried, "look ter the door-latch o' yer sixes, fer thar's fun ahead. Thar's reds at the south, as wal as to the north, an' we're in a trap. What is it ter be?—stan' ground an' fight, hyer, or run the gantlet? We've got ter shake the dice-box with them."

Hailstorm Harv did not intend to take anything for granted. He put his own horse in motion, and, in a few minutes, had obtained proof of all that had been asserted. Strangers were on each side of the timber; a mixed gang of Indians and white men; and his experienced eyes were not long at fault.

It was a marauding party, and made up of the worst elements to be found in the Northwest, composed as it was of disatisfied red-men and lawless whites.

"What say, old hoss, shall we j'ine?" asked Bragg.

"For my part, yes," Harv replied. "It's fight anyhow, an' with such tremendous odds, the more noses we count the better our show."

He looked at Doctor Allenton, and the latter nodded. Reluctant as he was to keep company with Chapin's party he was not out of love with life, and he had unbounded faith in Harv's judgment.

The skill of the three bordermen now showed itself. All of the enemy were moving in a general easterly direction. They had divided so as to keep clear of the timber, where enough underbrush existed to make the way unfavorable. Hailstorm Harv led the smaller party to the extreme western point of the timber. That must be their post until circumstances showed them definitely what to do.

In case of a fight they would be as united as if better friends, and it would not be a party to be despised.

Fresh signs of trouble were discerned when, the van of the war-party having passed the less open part of the grove, it swung in and evinced an intention to unite again.

"They'll find our camp-fire!" exclaimed Harv.

"And that means fight."

"Yes. They'll trail us easy, an' can't help findin' us. Gents, it's my opinion we had better not wait too long. We've gotter charge through the rear ranks, and ef we make a dash afore the fire is found, and the word of alarm sent out, we'll hev jest so much more chance ter ride through alive. A good start is a big thing."

Bragg and Peters promptly agreed with this summary, and great care was taken to start at the right moment.

Finally Harv gave the word, and the six men broke from cover.

Mounted on fresh, spirited horses, all of which were accustomed to the work, they made the dash as only Western men know how. One moment they were in the timber; the next, they were flashing over the prairie.

A fight was inevitable. Shots would be exchanged, and a hand-to-hand struggle was almost certain. To all but the three borderers death appeared almost as sure. With such odds against them, how were they to escape? These natural and reasonable thoughts were not shared by Harv, Ben and Ceph. They had fought too many hard fights in the past to be overawed by numbers.

They were soon discovered, and a single war-cry was followed by a chorus in which both red and white marauders took part, the latter screeching quite as dismally as their allies.

"Save your fire!" directed Hailstorm Harv, coolly. "Let them fire first ef they want, but when I do sound the word fer hammer-poundin', make every shot tell. Ketch on!"

"You bet, ol' hoss!" quoth Ben Bragg, not sorry to fight by the side of a man whose fame had gone hundreds of miles along the wild North border.

This feeling was not shared by Allenton, Elbridge and Chapin, but none of them could be termed cowardly, and they were ready to defend themselves.

If any doubt had been felt that the hybrid party was on the war-path it soon vanished. Yelling and swinging their weapons they started to close in on the fugitives, but the clash came too quickly for general concentration.

No shots were fired, and, with but a short distance to go, the gantlet-runners were soon among their foes. The rear guard massed itself to prevent the success of the dash by sheer weight of numbers, but they had to deal with men who knew how to fight hard.

The shock came, and the identity of every man was almost swallowed up in the confused

swaying of the whole mass. Shouts and whoops sounded, blows were given and shots exchanged, but, before those at a distance could arrive to take part, the crowd parted before the human wedge and the six men rode out. Few had escaped one or more wounds, but all sat their horses firmly, and the latter were in just the mood for a wild run.

Away they went, but the danger had only just begun.

Failing in their scheme of taking the smaller party alive, the allies now began to use their rifles, and bullets whistled uncomfortably close.

"We're in this shuffle," cried Hailstone Harv, coolly. "Ben and Ceph, give them back as good as they send. Rest of you, jest give heed ter runnin' an' don't get throwed."

The duel began, and Harv and his companions could not very well miss entirely, but the enemy did not seem in good condition for the work. Shoot as closely as they might—and that, certainly was too close for comfort—they could not bring down one of the fugitives.

Harv, Ben and Ceph sent back shouts of defiance and derision.

"Bring on some men!" cried the guide. "Old women are not ter be trusted with pop-guns!"

None of the smaller party was acquainted with the track they were pursuing, but it seemed to be an unbroken level, and little heed was given to it.

Doctor Allenton had the extreme right. At one point he saw a fringe of bushes ahead, but, not suspecting danger, urged his horse through. It was a disastrous mistake. As they cleared the bushes he saw what looked like a bottomless gulf before him; then footing failed his horse and both fell down through space.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE MYSTERY OF ASHER.

A HORSEMAN was proceeding cautiously along a plain near the foot of the hills, keeping close to the latter to take advantage of the few trees, the prairie being unmarked by such a growth for miles.

He seemed to have seen hard usage, his garments being rumpled and torn. He had no rifle, but revolvers and a knife were in his belt. His cautious, watchful manner indicated personal apprehension.

Suddenly he reined in his horse. A man, who had been concealed by a tree, stood almost in his path. The rider's hand sought his revolvers, but rested there quietly as he marked the peaceable air of the second man. The two regarded each other closely, and then he who stood by the tree spoke calmly:

"Good-morning, Doctor Allenton!"

"What! you know me?" cried the rider.

"Why not?"

"You are a stranger to me."

"Think again! You have entertained me at your camp-fire."

The horseman's face brightened.

"By Jove! you are right. Your name is—is—I have it; 'tis Manchester."

"You are right."

"Mr. Manchester, I am glad to see you. I believe you are an honest man, while I am a man in distress."

"Indians?"

"Nothing less."

"I was aware they were out."

Walter Manchester regarded the doctor in a puzzled way, as if uncertain how to act, but at that moment footsteps sounded and Dark John made his appearance. The responsibility of helping the rider was shifted.

"So there are two of you?" continued Allenton.

Dark John threw his weight forward upon his rifle.

"We meet again, man of medicine," he observed.

"Again? Have I ever seen you before?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Look back three years. Remember a lonely hut where you one night took refuge from the storm; remember the sick man and his wife—the people of that Gypsy blood which many folks call accursed."

"That was many miles from here. Are you that sick man?"

"I was. Perchance your medicine then saved my life; I believe it did. Even the dark-skinned people know gratitude. Dogs do; rattlesnakes do not. Physician, my camp is near. If you are in need"—the rover ran his gaze over Allenton's dilapidated figure—"come and eat, drink and rest in my hut."

Allenton drew a breath of relief.

"I will do so gladly, for I am in need, sorely. You shall hear the story later; just now, the desire for food is more active than any other feeling within me."

"Come!"

John led the way and the doctor followed closely. Walter Manchester brought up the rear. He had been with the rover for two days, and was civilly, if not cordially, treated, John showing that he appreciated the gravity of the situation with the Indians and their outlaw

allies abroad, and was not sorry to have a courageous man to aid him if trouble came.

Despite this, Walter would have hesitated to take an outsider into camp, and was glad to have John act for himself. This the latter had done with more good-will than Walter had ever seen him show before, proving that he was grateful for the doctor's past aid; though his grim face had not been lighted by a smile.

The hunter followed to the hut, where John set food before the guest. Hagar and Asher were not present.

Allenton ate greedily. Finishing, he told the story of his adventure of the previous day.

"When I got my fall," he explained, in conclusion, "it was into a sort of barranca, which was an offshoot of the hills, and, as it proved, channel of an ugly stream of considerable size.

"I alighted at the bottom half-stunned, but the water saved my life. It then seized and carried me away like a feather, and it was some time before I could gain the beach-like strip of land between the water and the high, rocky banks. Once there I fainted, and lay unconscious for hours.

"When I recovered, I ascended the bank. All the actors in the fight, Indians, Hailstorm Harv and the rest, had disappeared: look where I might, no human being was visible.

"I am not sure what I should have done had I not seen my horse further down the stream. Like me he had escaped serious injury, and I secured him, mounted and followed the trail made by my fleeing friends and their pursuers.

"Night was near at hand, and, just before dark, I saw some of the Indians returning. I beat a retreat, and, though I escaped discovery, their movements drove me along for miles. When it was safe for me to stop, I was alone on a, to me, limitless prairie, and when morning dawned, I began an uncertain ride to find my friends. I was engaged in that task, and as far from it as ever, when I so fortunately encountered you."

There was a brief silence as he concluded, and then Dark John slowly observed:

"Yours is not the only encounter that will occur before this matter is settled."

The door was darkened, and Hagar and Asher appeared. The latter had recovered with far more rapidity than was to be expected, and walked without much difficulty. They entered and took seats with the absence of ceremony which characterized the Gypsies, but Dark John broke his record of taciturnity by remarking to his wife:

"Hagar, this is Doctor Allenton, who gave me medicine when I was ill."

Walter Manchester had turned his gaze from the men. Handsome Asher was as much of a puzzle and attraction to him as ever, and, when the latter entered, the hunter's gaze had unconsciously strayed to him. Thus it was he noticed that Asher did not seem to notice the addition to their party at all, and that, when John's words fell almost heedlessly upon Walter's ears, the latter saw Asher start, look at Allenton and flush almost crimson.

It was a strange look—a startled look—and it made the boy more than ever an object of wonder.

Hagar answered apathetically, and then Allenton added:

"I remember your wife well, but your party seems to have increased since then. This lad—"

He looked at Asher and ceased to speak.

"Is our son!" hastily explained Dark John.

"Yes."

It was a mechanical assent on the doctor's part. He continued to look at the boy, and a puzzled expression appeared on his own face. Asher moved uneasily, and then drew back into the darkest corner of the hut. He looked down at his delicate, moccasined feet, and the red hue of his face had been succeeded by one of pallor.

The rover, usually so indifferent, frowned and began to speak rapidly, but without getting any attention. Allenton heard nothing; saw nothing but the handsome boy.

"Are you deaf?" asked John, loudly and sharply.

The doctor aroused from his reverie.

"Pardon me! Did you speak?"

"I did, but your wits were wool-gathering."

"I beg you will excuse me, sir. Please repeat what you said, and I will not repeat my error."

Allenton was a courteous gentleman, and he endeavored to keep his word. The rover gave him chance enough to exercise his mind on passing events, and talked steadily of the Indian outbreak, and the danger it brought upon all honest persons not of their race.

Manchester continued silent, but he never had been more attentive to trifles. He saw that the doctor, while trying to devote all his attention to John, often grew absent-minded, lost the thread of conversation and stared at Asher; and that puzzled, inquiring expression did not leave his face.

The handsome boy was manifestly ill at ease under the scrutiny. Not once looking up directly, he toyed with the revolver and knife in his belt, but, in strong contrast to that warlike show, changed color frequently, and did not grow more composed.

Asher had never ceased to be a study and a

riddle to the hunter. His opinion that the youth was not a son of Dark John and Hagar, once arrived at, never wavered, but, now, vague suspicions of the past were growing stronger.

At last, Walter rose and left the hut. He did not believe the scene would continue much longer, and pity for Asher led him to relieve the boy of a possible share of embarrassment in the form of his own presence.

"The matter does not concern me," the hunter thought, as he walked away, thoughtfully; "therefore, let me respect the laws of hospitality and honor, and show no prying curiosity. But Asher—mysterious Asher! Can it be—"

He paused and shook his head in opposition to a suspicion seemingly too wild to be entertained.

He walked to the further side of the timber and looked out on the prairie. There was no sign of hostile Indians, or, indeed, of any human being, and, satisfied of temporary safety, he turned and went back slowly after a few minutes.

Not far had he gone, however, when he suddenly paused. Some one else had left the hut; Asher was leaning against a tree, his face half concealed by one hand. His attitude told of deep dejection.

Walter hesitated, reluctant to intrude, and then saw Dark John advancing from the direction of the hut with long steps and serious air. His footsteps, always cat-like, were muffled by the velvet-like grass, and his approach remained unheard by the boy, who had no warning until the rover's hand was laid gently on his arm.

Then Asher sprung to one side with a cry of alarm—with such evidence of actual fright that Manchester, conversant as he had become with the youth's peculiarities, was surprised.

But at sight of Dark John the need of alarm seemed to disappear, and Asher forced a faint smile.

"What a coward I am!" the hunter heard him cry.

John evidently had something to say. He said it quickly, pointing to the hut.

"Doctor Allenton is under discussion," thought the hunter.

Asher clasped his hands and faltered some reply. John recoiled. He again looked toward the hut, surprise and anger pictured on his face.

The boy did not wait for his companion to say more, but began to talk rapidly. With his hands still clasped, but, anon, raised in quick gestures, and then pressed over his heart; with cheeks flushing and paling with emotion; with great excitement and apprehension apparent in every way, he poured out some statement of which Manchester could hear nothing.

That it affected the rover deeply was evident. His sullen indifference was gone, showing that the heart of a man beat naturally in his breast, however thick the mask of reserve might be; and when he glanced toward the hut a scowl was on his face which was full of ominous import.

Clearly, Doctor Allenton was the object of discussion, and John's feelings were not growing kinder toward him.

But, much as was told him, more was revealed to Walter Manchester.

The latter had wondered at Asher's strange beauty; at the want of resemblance between him and his alleged parents; at the delicacy of his features and the smallness of his hands and feet, and at the peculiarity of his manner. Vague suspicions had been in the hunter's mind—suspicions seemingly too wild to be true, but the half of the truth had not been grasped.

Now, all was clear. Explained were the delicacy and fineness of the handsome face, the size of hands and feet, the shyness of Asher's manner—the shrinking from both Manchester himself, and from Allenton.

"Powers of enchantment!" the hunter exclaimed, "the handsome boy is Mirabel Wayland!"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE PUZZLE IN CAMP.

DOCTOR ALLENTON had made a motion to follow Dark John when he left the hut, but Hagar had captured him skillfully. The Gypsy's wife was no mean doctor. She had remarkable knowledge of herbs and roots, compounded them well, and could cure almost any trouble which would yield to treatment.

In the past many persons had tried to learn of her; to gather knowledge from her skill; but all had been repulsed. She would tell no secrets; she would help no one. Now, she suddenly became talkative. Allenton had cured John when Gypsy skill failed. Beginning by admitting that he was her superior, she asked questions rapidly and referred to her own practices without reserve.

She had set out to keep the doctor there, and she succeeded.

Dark John finally returned, his face somber and unprepossessing.

"What news?" Allenton asked, in a friendly way.

"None."

"No signs of Indians?"

"No."

"Do you think your camp safe?"

"To-night, we sleep up yonder."

The rover pointed to the hills back of the hut. "I'll go with you."

"This is a poor place for a man like you," returned John, and his ungracious manner should have told the doctor he was not wanted.

"Where is there a better one?"

"A rapid ride south would take you along in advance of the van of the hostiles."

"And I so lame I can hardly sit a horse? Thank you, but I do not aspire that way. I'll stick to your party, friend John. I'm not an old borderman, I admit, but I shall not be lost in company that has one woman and a delicate boy."

"Asher is strong!" quickly, sharply declared the rover. "He is a great rider and an accurate shot."

"All of the latter he may be, but strong he hardly seems. Your son perplexes me, John. I see something familiar in his face, yet he was not with you when we met three years ago. I look at you and your good wife to discover whence comes the well-known, yet vague, likeness I see in his face; but he is no more like either of you than white like black. I am at loss. Have I ever seen him before?"

"Never!" asserted John, scowling upon his guest. "My wife and I know so well what evil, and duplicity, and venom is in the white men of this nation that we have never allowed our son to go near the towns. Born and bred in the wilds of prairie and mountain, he knows no other home."

"Strange!"

"What is strange?"

"His delicate organization, his apparent refinement, his singularly handsome face—"

"Your fancy runs riot!" interrupted the rover, curtly, roughly. "You and I are old enough to be no longer silly day-dreamers. Let us be men! And why do we talk of a child when armed men ride near our door who would slay us at sight?"

"Well argued, I admit," returned Allenton, overlooking the sharp tone of the rebuke. "Let us speak practically. Let us plan for the future—for I am going to stick by you until this outbreak is over."

Dark John had rarely been called upon to make a decision more difficult than that of the present moment. He wished the doctor to go—most devoutly he wanted to be rid of him. But, on the other hand, there was the fact that Allenton had cured him when he was desperately ill. The rover was grateful, and when in that frame of mind—no very common condition with him—he was very grateful.

He could not order the unwelcome guest away, but his dissatisfaction remained so marked that Allenton should have seen it. He did not. Unaware of the strong undercurrent, he imagined he would be of help to the rover, and took the alliance as a matter of course.

Presently, Asher returned and took his old position in the dark corner. Turning his back partially toward the doctor he began to clean one of his revolvers, a work which he did with skill and deftness not to be excelled.

Walter Manchester soon followed, but, to his imagination, he entered an atmosphere very different from that ever existent in the rover's hut before.

He had not gone near the earnest speakers outside, and was confident they had not observed him regarding them; but his position in the party had changed radically—changed with the visible change in Asher.

Not for a moment did he doubt that Mirabel Wayland was near him again. By accepting this view of the matter he had an explanation of all the peculiarities which had made Asher so much an object of wonder, including the familiarity of the boy's face.

It was not strange that Walter had failed to suspect the truth before. Neither the scene in the house at Cottonwood Blaze, when he defended her, nor that by the camp-fire on the night when she deserted him, was calculated to impress her features indelibly upon his memory.

Even Allenton was thus far at fault. He, too, saw a familiarity; he, too, could not solve the mystery readily. But was he not likely to do so presently?

Manchester had made a resolution. He would be the champion and defender of the disguised girl. The bitterness following his desertion on the prairie was gone. The fact that she had endured the long, cold winter, and the consequent hardships, proved that she had trouble so serious that the slight to himself became insignificant in comparison.

As his feelings toward her became kinder they grew hostile toward Allenton in proportion. The doctor had been her lover; they had quarreled, separated. Not much of her story was known to the hunter, but in siding with her he also sided against the doctor. She feared him—shrank from him. That was enough. Walter and he could not be friends.

Allenton had received his lesson and did not again refer to Asher, but his gaze often wandered to the boy—as we will still call Asher—and with a puzzled incertitude which proved him still at a loss.

All this the hunter noticed, and saw with

pleasure, but he could not believe the doctor would long remain in ignorance. When the discovery came—what then?

Conversation went on, but it was all between Dark John and Allenton. Manchester had become suddenly as silent as the Gypsies usually were, and he and Hagar, and Asher, had nothing to say.

After dinner the hunter went out again, but was joined by the doctor with promptness which indicated design.

"Any Indians, yet?" the man of medicine asked.

"No."

"Don't you think it would be wise to move at once?"

"You heard the rover's opinion. He says our traveling should be deferred until night."

"Doubtless he is right. Are you a prairie veteran?"

"No, sir."

"John is a worthy man."

"Yes."

"Have you been with him long?"

Manchester suspected what was coming.

"No," he answered.

"The man has a remarkable physique. He and Hagar give me much credit for my aid when he was ill, but, really, it was less my skill than his splendid system. He and his wife are strong and healthy. Their son does not seem to be of the same stripe. How can such a puny youth endure a life so severe as this?"

"Puny?" Walter repeated, with an air of surprise. "Why, I regard him as a very muscular boy."

"You do? Impossible! He's as slender as a girl."

"Granted, but he is of that wiry constitution which is so deceptive. He is of great endurance, while his strength is fully equal to that of other boys of his age."

Walter made this statement with great gravity and outward candor, and enjoyed Allenton's puzzled air.

"Possibly I am deceived as to that. However, he does not resemble his parents as to face, anyhow."

The doctor still tried to speak carelessly, but he was at a critical point, and his gaze was raised to study his companion, and catch every change of expression. He saw one change, and only one. Manchester met his regard with an appearance of fresh surprise which, however, was not overdone.

"Indeed! do you think so?" he responded. "How opinions differ. I think Asher resembles his parents strongly!"

Allenton was staggered.

"You must be jesting."

"Not at all. I should know him for Dark John's son were I to meet him in Spain."

"They look about as much alike as a panther and a camel!" declared the doctor, irritably.

"You must have looked at him only casually," returned Walter, veiling his irony under the blandest of utterances. "He has the same black hair, dark skin and eyes; the same contour of face and the same expression. I even notice the same shade of voice, and the same habit of moving eyes, mouth and head, while their bodily movements are simply pattern and copy."

Allenton was dumfounded. The matchless audacity of the plausibly told fiction almost took his breath away. He had no reason for suspecting an intention to ridicule him, and did not give Walter his just due in that respect, but his independence of character led him to reply:

"Your eyes and mine must be amazingly different, sir. I think they differ in contour of face, expression and voice, while their general look and motions—great Caesar, Mr. Manchester, you or I must see crooked!"

"Pray, why are you so interested, doctor?"

"Interested? I am not. But then, you know, Gypsy rovers are scarce up this way."

"Dark John is a good fellow, but—" here Walter tried to make every word tell—"quick to revenge a slight or wrong. He allows no interference from any one. Why, temporary companion of him that I am, I let him severely alone in all things. I would not dare trifle or trespass in his camp."

Doctor Allenton assented readily, but his manner did not show whether he took the hint. However, he asked no more questions indicative of curiosity concerning Asher.

CHAPTER XV.

THE OUTLAWS IN THE WOOD.

DARK JOHN left camp an hour before twilight, on a scouting expedition, and did not return until an hour after darkness fell. He came in and set his rifle against the wall in silence, but, calm as he was, Manchester felt that his news was not good news.

"Is the coast clear?" Allenton asked.

"I have not troubled the coast."

With this vague reply the rover turned his gaze thoughtfully upon Asher, and the latter surprised himself by speaking with spirit:

"Let us know the worst, father John. Some of us may be young in years, but I trust we are not cowards. Speak out!"

"There is nothing to hinder our retreat," an-

swered John, "but it must be longer and harder than we thought. We cannot go the direct way I had planned."

"Indians?" questioned the doctor.

"Yes. Despite all our precautions we are discovered—how, it is useless to speculate. Among the lower range of hills, and in the very path we wished to tread, the hostiles await us. Perhaps they have seen me carry several rifles and lack the courage to attack us boldly. Be that as it may, they are there, and probably waiting until we would naturally be asleep, to attack us."

The face of the handsome boy seemed to lose a little color, but he bore the announcement well.

"We shall not remain to be attacked," proceeded John. "On the contrary, we start at once. Manchester, you know something of the adjacent country, and, as no one knows what may happen, listen to my plan: The river south of us is shaped like a letter Y, each branch rising in the hills. We are near one of these branches, and will follow it to the junction. Then, instead of keeping on down the river, we will turn through the other branch and make our way back to the hills."

"Pardon me," remarked Allenton, "but isn't this a waste of time?"

"Our trail must be broken. The river is just suited for the purpose, and, once we enter it, will not be left until we are on the western ledges of which I know."

"Your judgment, as usual, is good. I'll gladly follow your lead."

No time was lost in idle delay; preparations were begun at once for their flight. Dark John and Hagar packed their few camp goods in the usual way, and in a form easily transported. Then the horses were saddled and bridled, and all mounted.

Of the party Asher, alone, seemed to be affected by the crisis, and there was no cowardly fear betrayed on his part. He was, however, ill at ease, and, when they were all mounted, he reined his horse close to Manchester's side. It was very quietly done, but the hunter did not fail to notice and be impressed by it.

That Asher would select him for a protector rather than Doctor Allenton was agreeable, and that was what the movement meant.

The start was made with Dark John at the head of the party, and in a manner suitable to the occasion. The night was not so dark as was desirable, and sounds loud enough to betray them were to be avoided rigidly.

When once under way circumstances forced Asher so distinctly into Manchester's company, the other men being in front and Hagar at the rear, that the youth manifested some uneasiness, and the hunter addressed him quietly:

"This ride is a novelty."

"A novelty I don't like," was the frank answer.

"You should be accustomed to it now."

"Indian outbreaks are rare."

"Yet, as one who has lived on the border, you must have made night flights before."

Asher shot an inquiring glance at the speaker, and his manner indicated uneasiness.

"Why do you think that?" he asked.

"I have not long been on the prairie, yet I've had some experience, and John bids fair to give us more. Doctor Allenton is a valuable addition to our party; we have one more strong man with us."

"I fail to see what we gain by having him."

"Don't you like him?"

Asher hesitated before answering.

"He has conducted himself well since coming here, and we can judge persons only by what we see of them. Doubtless, he is all right, but being a boy, I shall leave him to Father John. I don't care for him."

"Chance," returned Manchester, more earnestly, "has caused you and me to set out on this journey side by side. Pardon me if I remark that you are not so old as the rest of us, and that I should be glad to have you rely on me, as far as my abilities go, in case of trouble."

"You are kind, but I am not so insignificant as I look," returned Asher, with spirit.

"Did I intimate that you was insignificant?"

"No; and I hope you won't think me ungrateful; but Father John says boys grow in self-importance faster than in years. It may be so with me."

"I trust none of us will be obliged to show what his valor is to-night, but the more systematically we ride, the more company we shall be for each other."

Manchester found it no easy matter to express his ideas. He could not say Asher was weak and incapable of caring for himself, and ask the boy to put himself under his protection. He had done the best he could, and this was well enough so that the handsome boy kept the position first taken.

Dark John led the way toward the river, but made no great haste to enter it. When he did it was where he knew, from previous experience, that the nature of the soil would make a distinct ring around each footstep of the horses, and leave signs to be seen the next day.

He was anxious to let possible trailers know they had gone down the stream.

It was two miles from the camp to the junction of the streams, and the journey was made without adventure. Below, the united forks made a river not easy to travel through as they were doing. Each fork was deep in the middle, but grew shallow near the banks.

The most important part of the journey was at hand. Discovery was more liable to occur; the necessity of avoiding notice became greater than ever, for their future safety in the hills would be imperiled if a report should go abroad that they were seen going there.

After half of the journey in the new direction had been made, they reached a wood which extended to the base of the hills. It made good cover, but unfortunately was as well adapted in that respect to hide the whereabouts of a hostile party.

Here the stream narrowed, and the tall trees threw out their branches far over the water. A ghostly, silvery line marked the center of the stream, but near the banks it was blackness itself.

Manchester saw Asher shiver.

"It is an admirable cover," observed the hunter, reassuringly.

"Tis horribly dark."

"That's not against us."

"I don't know. It isn't comfortable to think we may at any moment come upon enemies who, concealed by the night and the bushes, can pour a deadly volley of rifle-bullets into our party."

"Really, I think there is no danger of that. Unless our movements are known—which seems impossible—our danger is small. Restless and eager as the enemies are, they will, when not forced by weariness to sleep, be charging about so impetuously that we could hear them at a distance and avoid them."

Dark John suddenly paused.

"Caution is the yoke-mate of success," he remarked, in a low voice. "Stay you here while I go and see that our way is clear."

"What have you seen?" asked Asher, impulsively.

"Nothing."

"You have heard something."

"To the old ranger the wood is always full of sounds when others hear nothing. I know not that human beings are near, but it would be criminal to neglect ordinary precautions. Be calm, all; there is nothing to fear. Hagar!"

The Gypsy's wife rode to his side, and he tossed the rein of his horse to her.

"Let there be as little moving about as possible," added the rover, "and no loud conversation. I will soon return."

He slipped from his horse; the bushes rustled, and he was gone.

"There is imminent danger!" whispered Asher, trying to be calm, but hardly with success.

"Have no fear," Walter returned. "Even if an enemy is near, our position is admirably calculated to screen us from observation. See! the drooping bushes almost hide you from view, and, though my horse and yours are side by side, I am revealed but vaguely, and might be mistaken for a point of the bank."

"I will try not to be cowardly."

Manchester noticed a break, just back of them, in the bushes which fringed the bank—a place which, he thought, might be a ford, or, possibly, worn away by animals that came to the river to drink. He wished they were a few yards further up the stream, but gave the matter no serious thought until the wood gave forth sounds audible and intelligible even to him.

Asher impulsively grasped the hunter's arm, and then as abruptly relaxed his hold.

"Horsemen!" he whispered.

"Be calm!" was the reply. "You are safe." Two horses came down the bank, lowered their heads and began to drink. The riders were invisible, but so close that Manchester could almost have touched the nearest with his rifle. Only the bushes separated them—a narrow and feeble guard of safety.

"This is what I call p'izon work," grumbled an unseen man. "Hyer we be, liable ter fall in with the half-an'-half marauders any minute, an' that means we'll git cur ha'r raised. An' no need on't! Durn the boss! why can't he use some jedgment?"

"Judgment! Ceph Peters, did yer ever know a man in love ter use sech?"

"Never, Ben, I allow; but is Elbridge in love? He seems ter hate the gal."

"Why shouldn't he? She's trod on his pet corn an' skrusched the hide off. But that only makes him the hotter; he's bound ter ketch the gal. He will do it, too, right soon!"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE FIGHT AT THE FORD.

MANCHESTER looked anxiously at Asher. Ben Bragg and Captain Peters were at hand—enemies to be feared as much as the hostile Indians, if his suspicion in regard to Asher were correct. What would be the result of this startling discovery—of the proximity of the lawless pair?

The hunter longed to comfort and encourage the handsome boy, but dared not whisper the least word of reassurance. To make a motion

of like import—to press the alleged boy's hand, even—would be to betray the suspicion.

"Don't know whether we'll ketch her or not," grumbled Ceph. "S'pose the wild gal rider o' the prairies does fall under our beaks, who knows it'll prove ter be Mirabel?"

"Who else should it be?" demanded Ben.

"Why should it be her? Can't other gals gallop around on a wild hoss?"

"Gals who would want ter, in cold weather, up this way, is skeerce as hen's teeth."

"What ef all the yarns about the gal rider was lies?"

"It ain't likely."

"Nobody may never hev see'd her, or she may hev been a ghost. Besides, she ain't been seen fer weeks. Mebbe some copper-skin has drawed bead on her an' settled her gallopin' with a bullet."

"Git out, Ceph Peters; you're a kicker!"

"Say w'ot yer will, I ain't satisfied. I hev friends among the white part o' the allies who is rampagin', an' I could hev lots o' fun with them. But, no; Roger Elbridge says we're ter play a lone hand. It'll be a long hand, an' no keerd in it bigger nor the seven-spot."

"Roger is sot in his way," Bragg admitted.

"I never seen a man more in 'arnest than he is ter find Mirabel. Tell yer w'ot, Ceph, when yer take love an' mix it with hate it's like all mixed drinks: a feller will git full on't a heap quicker than on straight whisky. Hey?"

"I reckon."

"But he ain't got Mirabel, an' I ain't sure he will. We don't git no more clew ter the beautiful gal rider, an' it wouldn't surprise me ef we shouldn't, though we may be within a mile o' her, now."

The horses had ceased drinking and, champing their bits, stood in passive attitudes. Manchester devoutly wished they would move on. However it was with Ben and Ceph, the animals could not be ignorant that others of their kind were near. The same statement applied to the horses of the fugitives, and that none of the animals would give an alarm seemed too good luck to be realized.

Walter was sensible that Asher was trembling, but, as before, he was powerless to comfort the youth.

Hagar and Doctor Allenton were aware of the danger, though unable to overhear anything; and they were duly discreet and silent.

There were further sounds in the wood, and an angry voice suddenly cried:

"Ben! Ceph! Where are you?"

"Hyer, Cap!" Bragg answered.

"Sulking in the traces, as usual. Confound it! why can't you get some life into you? I've never seen you lazy when reaching out for your pay. Get down to business! Jonas Chapin has seen a party in the river, below—fording, I suppose—and they doubtless crossed to this side. They must be in the wood, now, and must be found. We can't let any of these small squads slide away unlooked at. The Wayland girl may be near, and we want to trot her back to Liberty, for the law to deal with!"

It was Deputy-Sheriff Elbridge who spoke, and, even then, Manchester wondered for a moment at the relentless malice with which the man had so long pursued his coveted prey. Clearly, it was not fame, duty or money which urged him on, but hatred and malevolence of the most unmanly kind.

Ben and Ceph hastened to make excuses.

"We are near the end of the chase," Elbridge added; "we can't long keep it up with an Indian war at our front. Men, it's now do or die, and I'll add a hundred in cold cash to whoever catches the girl, on top of the promised reward. Hunt in your most zealous way; look your keenest. The girl may no longer be a half-Indian wild-rider; she may be in some other disguise."

"We'll find her ef she's a-top o' y'arth!" asserted Ben.

The minor ruffians had drawn back from the bank, and, being ready for work, now rode away where Roger Elbridge led.

Manchester waited in vain for Asher to speak, and then broke the silence with the low remark:

"You see we are out of danger."

There was no answer, and Asher began to sway in his seat so that the hunter was afraid he would fall. Laying hold of his arm, Walter sympathetically asked:

"Can I help you?"

The boy put one hand to his throat.

"Wait!" he whispered.

"The men are gone."

"I know; I—know. I—I was taken with sudden illness—"

"I understand. The fatigue, the uncertainty, the danger—all has been trying to the nerves. You will be better presently."

"I am better already. A slight dizziness; that was all. I trust you will not think me weak."

"Certainly not. I often find my own nerves shaken."

Manchester would have pleaded guilty to almost anything to excuse Asher's weakness even to Asher, but the crisis was over. Whatever effect the woman-hunters had had on the boy soon passed, and when Dark John quietly made his appearance again, Asher was himself.

"We are not alone in the woods," the rover observed, "but I trust we shall not have trouble."

"Did you see the men who were near us, here?" asked Manchester.

"I merely heard them as they rode away. Are they our enemies?"

"They're not members of the band of allies, but I judge they are enemies of all honest persons. I have seen them in the past, and can certify that they are full of evil."

The hunter bent toward Dark John and added in a low voice:

"Their names are Elbridge, Bragg and Peters. You will remember them, doubtless, if you look back to a certain camp-fire of last fall."

The rover stood silent and inactive for several moments.

"These men," he finally answered, "do not concern us now, but I remember them in the past. For their former sins they must make atonement now, if we meet. While we will not seek them, we will not tolerate their presence."

For a moment his face was turned toward Asher; then he went to the front, mounted, and they proceeded as before.

A deeper vail of gloom seemed to hang over the party. Allenton and Hagar knew other riders were near; Asher and Walter knew the hybrid allies were not the only enemies to fear. The dark-faced boy bore himself much better than was to be expected, and Manchester did all he dared to encourage and cheer him.

As they went on rod by rod hope grew stronger, but luck was not with them. In the darkest part of the wood they found themselves suddenly mixed up with other riders—a party about to ford the river, it seemed. Their nature was soon revealed, for a single war-whoop was followed by a chorus of screeches, and the situation could be interpreted only one way.

They had run into the hybrid allies.

Then blows were given and received, and friend and foe became mixed one with another. The water was deep, impeding the movements of the horses and adding to the confusion. Manchester tried to keep near Asher, and battled stoutly against the foe, but Asher's own horse precipitated the catastrophe by refusing to obey the rein, and the boy and his defender were separated.

But the horse was not yet done. Perceiving that he was near the bank he hastened to gain the land, and succeeded, only to be seized by an Indian who was on foot. The animal broke away, and thoroughly alarmed by the sounds of strife, ran, and the boy rider was incapable of using an effort to try and restrain him.

They were soon clear of the contestants, but not alone. Asher heard the galloping of another horse in the rear and knew he was pursued. He was utterly demoralized, and the rein lay loosely on the horse's neck. Nearer and nearer came the pursuer, cutting down the runaway's lead, until Asher expected to feel the grasp of a red scalper.

Instead, in the midst of his terror, came a cool voice:

"Child, is your steed unmanageable?"

Asher turned his head, and then burst into tears.

"Hagar, oh! Hager, thank heaven you are with me!"

The masculine woman seized the loose rein and checked the runaway horse.

"Child, you have lost your courage," she declared, with some severity.

"I have—oh! Hagar, I am terribly frightened!"

"Bah! You are not fit for the Northwest."

"I am not fit for anything."

"You might have stopped the brute. Instead, you have allowed him to go on until we are far from any one else. You would have been alone had I not made it a duty to watch and keep near you."

"Don't censure me! I am weak, discouraged, hopeless!"

"Child, I have no censure for you, nor did I intend to speak harshly. Long ago I told you that, when the lordly race of the pure white face turned persecutor, the hour of the dark Gypsy had come. Have I ever belied my words?"

"Never!"

"I will not now."

"You have always been kind to me."

"Trust in the swarthy woman, still. You know her strength and courage; many a man would change heart and muscle with the wandering woman."

"What shall we do?"

"Avoid foes until we find friends," was the laconic reply.

Asher shivered.

"We left them fighting for life. How know we what has happened?"

"Dark John will not fall," Hagar returned, with confidence.

"But—the others?"

"Think not of them, but of yourself. We are separated from them, and must rely upon our own wits to save ourselves. Our way lies yonder, where the hills raise their rock-crowned heads. Secrecy is less necessary, now; Dark John's plan has been rendered vain by the chance meeting.

Come! we will go on the best we can, using the open wood. Be calm, child, for the wandering woman is at hand to protect you. Come!"

CHAPTER XVII.

HARD PRESSED BY FOES.

HAGAR turned her horse toward the mountains and led the way, and Asher followed. Neither was armed as could be wished. Asher had dropped his rifle, and his belt of weapons had gone, how and when he knew not. Hagar had only a knife. Unknown to the boy her hand was slowly bleeding from a wound received in the recent fight, but she heeded it not.

The Gypsy was fully aware that it was no small undertaking to try to get to the mountains. The wood had grown silent, as far as Hagar could distinguish, but the allied force was still there, and eager to find victims.

Despite this knowledge her composure never wavered outwardly, and she held to the course marked out with calm persistency. Asher longed to converse; to have something to keep his mind off of passing events and the gloom of the wood, but he dared not make an unnecessary sound; it might call enemies down upon them.

But, with all their care, they were not to escape another collision. It came suddenly, and, doubtless, was a mutual surprise. The first warning was when other riders were about them; they had ridden directly into another party.

It took but a moment for Hagar to see that they were Indians, and again it was flight and pursuit. The trained horses of the fugitives needed but little in the way of suggestion; they were ready and eager to run.

It was a ride which Asher did not soon forget. After the first outbreak the pursuers made no unnecessary noise, but they followed relentlessly. Several times the fugitives barely escaped being swept from their horses by projecting limbs, and, as the bushes brushed sharply against them, it was a rough experience.

Finally, the leaders in the race found themselves alone; the Indians had disappeared. Whether they had been distanced one by one, or had given up in disgust, together, could not be told, but one thing was sure—the pursuit had taken Hagar and Asher far away from the hills.

"It's a dangerous road to retrace our steps," observed Hagar, looking into the darkness. "Only the most favorable of chances would take us through unseen. We must cross the river, go to the extreme southern side of the wood, and work along the border."

"Mother Hagar, I am utterly exhausted!" sighed Asher.

"But you can ride?"

"I don't know. Besides being weary I am very nervous, and, perhaps by a combination of the two causes, I tremble so I can hardly keep in the saddle. I am ashamed of my weakness, but so it is."

"Poor child! it is no wonder," the wandering woman replied, with unexpected gentleness. "The events of the night have been enough to upset stronger nerves than yours. The night is not yet spent, and we may safely rest awhile."

The speaker sprung to the ground, advanced to Asher's side and assisted the boy to alight.

"See!" Hagar added, "here is a great tree with a carpet of grass around it. Lie there and rest."

Asher needed no urging. Murmuring a few words of thanks he sunk down. It seemed like inviting fresh perils and positive misfortunes, but he had not exaggerated when speaking of his condition. For several days he had been in a nervous state, and had rested poorly at night. Now, all the horrors of flight from the camp had acted upon him with unexpected force; he was in a condition bordering on total collapse.

Hagar did not even sit down. Her muscles were as hard as those of a strong man; her endurance, remarkable. She walked back and forth, listening and planning. Well did she know that precious minutes were passing, but she accepted the inevitable and looked to the future as only a person of boundless courage can.

Finally she advanced to Asher's side.

"Are you rested?" she asked.

There was no answer, and she bent over the boy. He was asleep.

To the wandering woman, who had none of the weaknesses of a delicate organization, the fact seemed strange, for she knew it was the result of utter weariness; but it aroused no severe reflections. Asher muttered in his sleep, and the words were audible.

"I have no friends left but you and mother Hagar!"

The woman started up. The tribute could not but be sincere, and it moved her. Under her grim exterior was a kind heart, even if but few knew it, and she gladly would have borne the burdens of the sleeper.

The horses had strayed a few rods away, but the experience of years led Hagar to believe

they were perfectly safe. She had not counted upon the effect the wild scenes of the night would have upon their own nerves. Now, as they wandered on, a huge bird suddenly rose and, with a cry, flapped its wings almost in their faces.

The result was startling.

Instantly the horses wheeled and galloped away, and Hagar's loud command did not check them. Rapidly they receded, until all sounds died away, and she knew they had deserted in earnest.

The catastrophe moved even the iron-willed woman. For herself she would not have cared so much, for she could walk to the hills without trouble, and, perhaps, be surer of reaching them in safety than if she were mounted, but, for Asher, it was a great loss.

Even the boy's condition must yield in this emergency. By following promptly after the runaways, they might possibly be recovered.

She aroused Asher and explained the situation. He made no complaints, and patiently began the journey on foot, but the sprain of his ankle made itself felt after going a few rods. The improvement vanished, and the boy walked with difficulty. Seeing this, Hagar compelled him to take her arm, but, even then, it was a slow and laborious journey.

Contrary to their hopes, nothing was seen of the horses. The wood was painfully silent, and appeared to be deserted. Friend and foe had alike passed out of sight—if any one but themselves remained in the timber, the fact did not appear.

Gradually it dawned upon Hagar that the journey on foot was a failure, and that they would not succeed in reaching the hills. Asher's movements grew slower, and were accompanied with more pain. He made no complaint, but Hagar could read for herself.

Finally she stopped short.

"We will rest here!" she announced.

"Isn't it rash?" Asher asked.

"We can't tire ourselves out wholly."

"We?" It is I to whom all blame is due. You are as fresh as ever; I am the weakling. I feel it keenly, mother Hagar, and will keep on—"

"No, child; no! I am not acting blindly. Why should we go on? At any moment we may run into the Indians. Better by far to take a reasonable course, and not overdo the matter. We have friends, and they will not desert us. Dark John and the young hunter will search until we are found; day will bring better results. Lie down and rest. Take my word; that way is best."

There was authority as well as advice in Hagar's manner, and Asher resisted no longer. Again he lay down, and the deep sigh which followed told how welcome the recumbent position was. This time unconsciousness did not come so quickly, but he was soon sleeping soundly.

When the latter fact became apparent to Hagar, she arose and walked about in a thoughtful mood. Not affected in the least by the events of the night she was anxious to be moving on, but did not dream of leaving her charge. Still, she fully realized how precarious their situation was. If daylight found them still in the wood it would be remarkable if they escaped. The enemy had seen, but failed to capture them. Sharp, indeed, would be the search when day dawned.

Not once during the night did the Gypsy close her eyes. No one came near them; if it had been so their movements would not have escaped her notice.

At last the darkness began to fade. Day came, grim and gray. Asher awoke and sat up.

His condition was better than was to be expected. Sleep had revived him greatly, and when he tried his injured ankle he found he could walk with less pain.

"I shall be able to go on very well," he asserted, hopefully.

"Our worst trouble is a lack of food."

"We cannot even kill a bird."

Hagar looked at her knife.

"This is all we have, and no game is likely to come and stand up for slaughter. Even if it were so we have no fire, and could not cook what—"

The woman paused. Footsteps had sounded, and, looking up suddenly, she saw they were no longer alone. A man stood within a few yards of them—an object which would have been no agreeable sight under any circumstances. He was big and muscular, coarsely and slovenly dressed, brutal of face and lawless of appearance. At this moment, too, he bore signs of hard usage which had disturbed his garments and hirsute growth, while a white rag which was tied around his head was stained with blood.

This person did not seem to be wholly steady on his legs, and he stood staring at Hagar and Asher in stupid surprise.

"Blame me ef it ain't a woman an' a boy!" he finally exclaimed.

Hagar regarded him severely, but made no reply.

"Would as soon 'a' thought o' seein' Gin'ral Jackson," the wounded man added. "S'posed the women an' kids was all dead an' scalped."

My own hair is loose all around the roots, an' I'm a tough ol' rooster, yer know."

"We know nothing about you, and care less!" curtly retorted Hagar.

"Don't know me? Don't know me? Why, I'm Ben Bragg, the screamin' eagle o' the Rockies; the p'ison serpent o' the foot-hills; the howlin' jeehosh o' the plains. Dunno wot a jeehosh is, do yer? Wal, it's me; it's Ben Bragg, the great unterrified!"

"That is nothing to us. Move on!"

"Eh? Say, I've been movin' on all I feel in trim fer. Don't keer ter move on no more. Reckon I'll stay an' protect you. Always did like ter protect females."

"We can protect ourselves."

"Kin you? Wal, you do look tolerable sprightly, I allow. But see hyer, ol' gal, ef my eyes ain't deceivin' on me, I've seen you afore. I hev, b'mighty!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE WOMAN GYPSY AT BAY.

BEN BRAGG chuckled gleefully.

"Didn't expect ter see you here, ol' gal, but strange things will happen, yer know. You was with the Gypsy down at Cottonwood Blaze in old days. 'Member you wal. S'pose yer hev forgot Ben Bragg?"

"I supposed he was hanged before now!" Hagar retorted.

"You did? Come off; I don't b'lieve it. It's nonsense. Thar ain't no reason why you an' me should be clawin' an' sneezin' like two cats. We're both in hard luck, an' a good deal chawed up. I s'pose Dark John is dead. Hey?"

"No. He will be here directly."

"Will he? I hope so; I want ter borer a chaw o' terbarker."

"You are more likely to get a chew of lead."

Ben did not answer; his gaze had wandered to Asher. His appearance on the scene had alarmed the boy; he had started and changed color as soon as the burly ruffian began to speak, and now, regarding Ben with startled eyes, looked liable to take to flight at any time.

"Hullo, hullo!" Bragg exclaimed, "wot we got hyer?"

"Nothing that need to concern you," snapped Hagar.

"A poooty boy, b' mighty! Half-Injun, ain't he? or what sort of a mixed drink do you call him? Who is he? I've seen the youngster afore, but don't place him jest now. Took him pris'ner, ain't yer?"

Hagar's expression was hostile in the extreme and her eyes darted angry glances at the ruffian, but she remained prudent.

"If it'll do you any good to know, he's my son."

"He is? Hop down from the twig! I ain't so green as that. Rhinocerhosses ain't parents ter doves. Why, ol' gal, your hide is like sole-leather, an' his'n like silk. Stan' up here, youngster, an' let me look at yer. Tolerable sprightly lad, I'll swear, but more bone would make his arms ar' legs. Can't imagine whar I've see'd the critter afore!"

Ben removed his battered hat and dug four dirty fingers into his disheveled hair until contact with his wound made him grimace and cease trying to jog his memory. Asher did not rise as requested.

"You never saw him before; don't talk nonsense. You are drunk, anyhow, Ben Bragg!"

"I be poooty wal loaded, but yer see I got this wip on the head, an' I needed a little ammunition ter keep the wound from strikin' in. See? So John's deserted yer? Wal, I'm a better man nor him any day; I'll fall to an' be yer guardien angel. Trot out some grub, ol' gal!"

"You have gone quite far enough!" declared Hagar, sharply. "I don't want to hear any more of your idle talk. We shall give you no food, for we have none to give. You would have none if we carried a load of it. More than this, you are not wanted here. This is our camp, not yours, and we want you to leave directly. We won't have you near. Move on!"

She half-drew the knife from her belt, but the confident ruffian laughed.

"You wouldn't use it, would ye? What would I be doin' with these barkers?" touching his revolvers. "Come, le's hev peace an' harmony. Let me set down an' commune with yer, my daisy!"

The Gypsy's eyes flashed. She did not fear Ben Bragg in the least, and would have forced matters to the decisive point at once had she been armed as well as he.

"You can stay here if you wish. We will go on. Come, Asher!"

The boy rose, but again Ben laughed.

"All right!" he agreed, "toddle on; but I'll go with yer. Thar's strength in union, an' I'll stick right by you."

"Then we won't go!"

Hagar sat down with a determined air and Asher followed her example. Ben stood, and his small evil eyes twinkled with satisfaction.

"Nothin' will suit me better than ter camp with you an' the boy. Condemn'd funny what makes the youngster look so familiar ter me! I've seen him afore, but whar? Boys like him ain't common; shoot me ef he ain't put tergether

as delikit an' trim as a gal. Say, sonny, whar've we met afore?"

Ben was thoroughly puzzled, and studied Asher's face with unabated interest, but gained no assistance. Asher, plainly, was confused and annoyed—frightened, too, it seemed—by such persistent attention, but he made no reply. Instead, Hagar spoke with emphasis:

"You are a ruffian and a coward! No one with a spark of manhood about him would act as you do. You have been told that you are not wanted, but you take the delight of a low nature in persisting in your evil course. The day will come when you will be sorry for it: Dark John will repay you!"

"Pooh! pooh! What do I keer fer him?"

"You care because you are a coward. Even now, though you are a man and I a woman, you dare not lay your revolvers aside!"

Hagar sprung up, her black eyes flashing, and confronted Ben with drawn knife.

"Come, now; none o' that!" he cried, hastily.

"Put up that carver an' set down."

"No! Will you leave us?"

"Reckon I kin stay whar I please."

"You cannot. Leave this camp, or you and I will settle our dispute at once."

Her determined attitude, masculine figure and ominous front, supplemented by the knife, caused Bragg to fall back and draw a revolver.

"Keep away, you tiger-cat!" he growled. "I'm a meek man wot never querrils with anybody, but I won't be misused. You keep off, or I'll use my barker. You hear that, don't yer?"

Hagar heared, but her hot Gypsy blood was aroused, and she seemed likely to defy the revolver and leap upon the ruffian. Fortunately for her, perhaps, for Ben was no mean enemy, there was a timely interruption.

"What's the rumpus hyer?" cried the voice of a new actor in the scene.

All looked to the quarter whence came the inquiry; there sat Hailstorm Harv on his horse.

"This crazy woman wants ter carve me up," growled Ben, not at all pleased to see the guide, and, being well aware that the latter had no good opinion of him, afraid matters would go against him. "She's a reg'lar cut-throat."

Harv flashed an analytic glance toward Hagar and Asher.

"An' what hev you been doin'?"

"Nothin'."

"Tis false!" cried the Gypsy. "The villain has forced his company upon us, and acted the bully to the extent of his ability. If you are an honest man I ask you to drive him away."

"Look as ef you're at your old tricks, Ben Bragg!" Harv exclaimed. "I never knew you ter be in decent work. We have run up against each other before, an' I reckon this count is the worst on the bill."

"The woman has lied about me. Don't you b'lieve a word, Harv. I'm wounded an'—"

"Drunk! I kin see that. Madam, spin your yarn, an' ef Mister Ben Bragg has disgraced his self, he kin jest p'int his nose on the gee-trail an' rattle his hoofs in a race ag'in' time!"

It was not easy to get the facts, for Ben insisted upon having his say, and Hagar could not tell just why his presence was so obnoxious to them, but it was enough for Hailstorm Harv that Ben had forced his company upon those who did not want it, and had acted the bully toward a woman.

The guide pointed toward the north.

"Somewhere over there, Ceph Peters an' the rest o' your squad are camped, I reckon. I ain't dead sure, fer I got all o' their company I craved, an' quit them. March over an' see ef they're doin' wal!"

Ben stood still, ill at ease, but helpless. He hated Harv, and would have defied him, but it was an unpleasant fact, unknown to the others, that his revolvers were empty.

"Move!" added Harv, sharply.

Ben swallowed, as if bolting some unpleasant substance, and sullenly returned:

"You've got the drop, now, old man, fer I'm wounded, an' as weak as a run-down buffler, but don't yer think this ends it. You acted rusty ter me in the past, but when we met 'way up hyar, I see fit ter bury old grudges an' meet you civil. Now, you've stirred up the muddy waters o' discord ag'in, an' the day is comin' when you'll be sorry. You hear?"

"Yess; an' your tongue goes like a mill. See ef your legs kin equal it. Skip!"

There was no help for it. Ben swallowed again, flung deep malice and hatred upon all from his evil little eyes, and then turned and walked away. He did not once look back.

"That's the last o' him," commented the guide.

Asher was not so sure of it. He had not forgotten the glances Ben bestowed on him early in the interview; he had not forgotten Ben's avowed curiosity. Recollection and prophetic fear made Asher tremble, though he said not a word.

"Stranger," said Hagar, "we are much obliged to you."

"That's all right. I've been on the North Plains a good many year, an' never had reason ter regret helpin' the weak an' unlucky in their straits. Say, I don't want ter seem pryin'some,

but I wonder who you be? An' do yer know you're liable ter fall afoul o' critters whose sole aim, now, is ter raise hair?"

"We know it well; we were separated from our party last night by the Indians, and left friendless here."

"By George! it's lucky I came. Rely on me ter get you back safe ter them friends. Who was they?"

"My husband, John; a certain young man named Manchester, Doctor Allenton—"

"Doc Allenton? You don't say so! Why, he's the man I act polite to on pay-day; he's my boss. Thunder! though, but I thought he'd gone under, sure. We all run the gantlet, an' all escaped but him. We missed the doctor, but was not able ter turn back with two hundred reds howlin' at our heels. Since then I've been huntin' fer him, but the chances was all ag'in' me. Say, I want ter spot the doctor; ef you'll lead me to him I'll agree ter save you from all foes an' fracases on the way. How is it—shall we strike paws an' tramp in the same outfit?"

Hagar had been studying the guide critically, and her answer was all ready. She and Asher certainly needed aid, and Harv's frank, honest face recommended him as few men are recommended by their appearance.

"We shall be very glad to accept your offer, stranger," the Gypsy replied, using courtesy and diplomacy for Asher's sake; "but how are we to travel? I defy any one to leave me behind at walking, but my young son has a sprained ankle and can hardly step—"

Harv leaped to the ground.

"Easily arranged!" he declared. "My legs are all right, an' I kin hoof it with the best. The boy shall ride."

It was an offer neither could afford to reject. Although there was no sign of the hostile allies, it was clear they were not far away, and might appear at any moment. Hailstorm Harv seemed not only a safe but a valuable addition to the party, and every strong arm and honest heart were welcome at that time.

Harv explained the situation fully, and the guide then declared they would push forward to the hills at once. Dark John and his party might still be searching in the wood, but that was no place for non-combatants.

Asher was duly mounted on the horse, and the journey was begun.

With the exception of an occasional kind word Harv bestowed no attention upon Asher, and it was a relief to the boy to meet at last some one who did not stare at him as if a specter had risen from the grave. Asher was a sensitive youth.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE DOCTOR GROWS INQUISITIVE.

WEARY, and not far from being discouraged, Walter Manchester was searching for Hagar and Asher. Their horses had been found, saddled, bridled but riderless; and this fact seemed to indicate something serious.

The hunter found that he was deeply interested in the search. Of Hagar he rarely thought—he explained the fact by repeating, mentally, that the Gypsy was as able to care for herself as a man—but Asher, and Asher's danger, haunted him. The face of the handsome boy was ever before him in imagination, but painfully absent in reality.

No severe injury had been done him, Dark John or Doctor Allenton the previous night, and they were now prosecuting a systematic search for the missing members of their party.

Manchester passed through a thicket and then stopped short—Asher was before him; Asher was saved!

It had not been his good luck to be the rescuer, for Dark John and Allenton were already with the boy and Hagar, as was a tall, athletic-looking borderman who, at first sight, seemed familiar to the hunter, and was presently recognizable as Hailstorm Harv.

Walter hurried forward and was soon congratulating the rescued couple. In his energy he impulsively shook hands with both Hagar and Asher. Both showed signs of weariness, but were better off than was to be expected. Harv had guided them until they chanced upon Dark John.

"Now for the hills," said the latter, cutting useless talk short. "Secrecy is no longer in the question as far as our original lines were laid. Every moment we remain here is so fraught with danger that it would be folly to delay until night. We will go at once, even though we leave a plain trail to the foot of the hills."

He had not asked Hailstorm Harv's opinion, but the guide nodded and added:

"Right you are, old man! Nobody must stay here unless he wants a war-dance with a red fer partner."

"Will you journey with us?"

"Doc Allenton is my boss, but I vote, yes!"

"And I, most decidedly," declared the doctor.

No more time was lost. Dark John and Harv led the way, and it would have been hard to get two more careful, bold and wise leaders. Hagar and Asher rode in the center of the party, with Walter on one flank and Allenton on the other.

Despite their general weariness they were well

conditioned for flight. Every one bestrode a good horse, and there was an abundance of weapons—even Asher again carried his little rifle, it having been found during the day.

Manchester saw a change in the handsome boy. Weary as he certainly was, suffering as he might be with his ankle, he had a bolder front than before. Allenton still looked at him with puzzled inquisitiveness, but Asher seemed oblivious to the fact. He carried himself in a way more natural and easy than ever before since Manchester had come to the camp. Obviously, he was becoming accustomed to all this, or had made a bold effort to overcome his weakness. Now and then he threw the little rifle into a professional position, as it were, but it was not easy to sustain such an effort.

If the fugitives had been unlucky in making their night-journey they had been strangely favored since in not being discovered by the hostile allies, and their good fortune did not yet desert them.

The hills were reached without encounter; a fact which gave all great relief. Then Dark John led the way to the refuge he had in mind. Knowing the vicinity so well he was able to shape their course so that it would have been very difficult to follow the trail.

Finally the refuge was reached.

It was a cave, but not one suitable for a fortress. John had discovered and explored it years before. Although not easily found, it covered, in its main part, wings and branches, an area of three acres, though natural partitions of rock divided it into a dozen large and many small rooms. To this great underground region there were many entrances—so many that the rover did not dream of trying to make them impassable.

They must settle down, be watchful, and trust to good fortune for the rest.

One of the places of exit communicated with a ravine where there was abundant grazing, and there the horses were turned loose. They could not get out; it was next to impossible for any one to descend to their quarters; and discovery was not likely to follow.

Dark John arranged everything with skill and celerity. The main room was of large size and generously alcoved. In one of the latter places he put the scant stock of camp-furniture, explaining that he had built a fire there before and knew that ascending smoke was lost and divided in the rifts in the rocks until it was not likely to betray any one.

Other alcoves he pointed out as suitable places to spread their blankets and sleep at night.

They had a liberal stock of provisions in some ways, but far less than was needed for so large a party; and when breakfast had been prepared and eaten he announced his intention of going out to secure more. Other rifle-shots had been heard, and his were likely to pass as the efforts of a hunter belonging to the allies.

Rejecting all assistance, the rover left Hail-storm Harv in charge and went away.

Presently, Walter Manchester walked away, paused near a place of exit, and stood looking out at the wild confusion of rocks revealed beyond. There Doctor Allenton joined him. The man of medicine, though but little encouraged, naturally turned to Walter as the only other educated adult, and would have been more friendly than the hunter had yet allowed him to be.

"What do you think of our situation?" he now asked.

"We have roomy quarters," Manchester returned.

"How about safety?"

"I should hesitate to warrant the situation in that respect."

"At this moment I wish I were twenty years younger. A frontiersman of my age would not be a mean opponent, but when one has lived almost fifty years in the East, he is not fit for Indian fighting. I fear I shall be a weight upon the party, but do not intend to act the coward. I cannot, with so many other non-combatants here."

Walter regarded the speaker curiously.

"I see," he returned, vaguely.

"We have one woman and a boy—a delicate boy, too."

Manchester remembered their conversation at the camp in the timber, when he maintained that the boy had an abundance of physical strength, but did not see fit to repeat the ironical claim. He made no answer.

"Asher is a nondescript," added Allenton.

"What one of us is not? Did you ever know a man about whom you did not at some time, when he did something you thought eccentric, make the remark: 'He's a queer fellow?'"

"There is reason in that. Other people are 'odd' when they differ from, or even oppose, us; when they do what we would not do. All men are eccentric in our sight at times—you make a just claim, though I never thought of it in that light before. We all have our peculiarities. But surely, Asher is radically different from other people."

"He may think us peculiar."

"He is not like John and Hagar—"

"I think we discussed that point on a former occasion."

"You cannot have been in earnest. They are coarse, bony, rude, and, barring cunning, wholly lacking in intelligence. He is refined, delicate, intellectual and, as a whole, as far superior to them as heaven is above earth."

"Hadn't we better leave scientific phenomena until some other time?"

"My point is this: I don't believe Asher is the son of John and Hagar!"

"No?"

"Emphatically, no."

"Do you care whether he is or not?"

"I don't know," replied Allenton, unheeding the curt reproof of Walter's tone and manner.

"The fact is, the boy puzzles me."

"The scalp-hunters puzzle me!"

"Asher calls up something—I can't tell what. It may be a memory of real life; perchance only the unsubstantial matter of a dream. Doubtless, you have been similarly situated; have tried to seize a vague idea, but found it always far from your grasp. What do you know of Asher?"

The doctor abandoned his absent, thoughtful manner, and put the question bluntly.

"Nothing," was the tranquil answer. "I am not very much interested in children."

"You have been longer than I with Dark John; did you ever observe anything which made you suspect the boy was not what he seems?"

"No!" the hunter boldly answered.

Allenton looked disappointed.

"If the idea were not so wild I should say I had met one in the past who *was* of his kin. He has been an object of wonder to me from the first. One casual glance led me to notice how illy he was fitted for such wild life, but this trivial thought gave place to one more important. I saw something familiar in his face—"

"Nonsense! Chance resemblances are common, but are rendered untrustworthy by the fact that all do not see alike."

"Wait! I *did* see this familiar look, and began to study on it. I thought I had seen the boy before, but failed to remember where. At last the truth flashed upon me; I had never seen Asher, but one wonderfully like him."

"An Indian?"

"A girl of unadulterated white blood."

Manchester threw his form forward and leaned upon his rifle. He could not discourage or check the doctor, so he decided to learn all he could; to know just what Allenton suspected.

"Now you grow interesting," he observed.

"Proceed!"

"The girl I speak of," continued the doctor, "was intimately known to me for some time. Looking back I see she was never communicative in regard to her antecedents and relatives, but of this I am certain: The resemblance may be purely one of chance, or it may be one of relationship; but Asher is remarkably like Mirabel Wayland!"

CHAPTER XX.

THE COIL OF THE LASSO.

DOCTOR ALLENTON spoke with the earnest decision of one who felt deeply and was sure of his position, but Manchester met his regard quietly.

"Have you spoken to Asher of this?" the hunter asked.

"No. It is a delicate subject—"

"You are right. You claim to believe Asher is not a son of the Gypsies, but, be that as it may, he undoubtedly supposes he is. If he is not, there is a deliberate deceit; it may even be that he was stolen by John and Hagar when he was an infant. Knowing Dark John as you do; perceiving his hot blood and aversion to interference as you must, you cannot but realize that it would be delicate work to speak to him concerning it, or even to set Asher's suspicions at work; delicate even to the point of danger. Dark John would make a bad enemy!"

Without betraying unusual interest Manchester tried to make every word of this suggestive speech strike home, but Allenton did not appear affected.

"I shall not interfere," he responded, "for it is none of my business; and if Asher is related to the girl I named, I want nothing to do with him."

The unsuspecting doctor gazed thoughtfully at vacancy, unconscious that there was a world of meaning back of the steady regard the hunter fixed upon him. There was little of good will in Manchester's mind. If all accounts were true this man had once possessed Mirabel Wayland's love. The hunter blamed him for it. Something had separated them; he knew not what, but, possibly, the gulf was not wide enough to be incapable of being bridged. In an ease, Walter did not like Allenton; he wished him a thousand miles away.

The doctor turned suddenly.

"I've half a mind to tell you something, Mr. Manchester," he declared. "It may be foolish, but there are times when we feel an irresistible impulse to tell our troubles and seek consolation, and I recognize in you a gentleman who would not think lightly of another's misfortunes."

The hunter was tempted, at that moment, to check the blind confidence of his companion, but Allenton spoke too quickly.

"Did you ever hear of the town of Liberty?"

"I think so."

"It is in the southern part of this wild land."

"Yes."

"I went there to regain my health, which had become impaired by hard work at my profession in the East. I did not intend to practice there, but patients came to me; I built up a good business, and made many friends. Then I met Mirabel Wayland. She had come there almost a total stranger, and secured place as housekeeper for one Horace Granger. Her position soon became a myth, as it were; he took a great fancy to her, and she lived more like his daughter than an employee.

"As I said, I met her. From the first her beauty and intelligence attracted me. She had a rare mind, which counted for more with me than I can tell; the most beautiful woman living would become repulsive to me if I found her lacking in education and intellectual qualities.

"Mirabel was all the most fastidious could desire. I admired her, sought her society, and—well, the time came when she practically promised to marry me. I say practically because she would not agree in precise words. She admitted that her past life had been unhappy, and that its clouds still encompassed her. She bade me wait for a while."

Manchester listened eagerly. Mirabel and Allenton had broken their amicable relations. He was anxious to know why.

"One day I received a note, the post-mark of which was Liberty. I opened it and found a warning from an anonymous writer. I do not remember all of it, but one paragraph was like this:

"'Fool! do you think you possess Mirabel Wayland's love? If so, know that Horace Granger has a hundred dollars to your one, and is thirty years nearer the grave. A fine catch for a designing woman! If you doubt me, investigate!'

"I burned the note in anger and disgust, but its words haunted me. That evening I went to Granger's house, and—my manhood revolted at it, but I acted the spy. Going secretly to the side of the house I looked into the window, which was half hidden by shrubbery. I saw Mirabel in old Granger's arms, and he was kissing her!"

The strength of recollection overcame the narrator, and he clinched and raised his hand as if to strike a blow. Even Manchester was startled, for he had not expected such a statement.

"You were deceived as to the identity of the girl," he finally suggested, quickly.

"No," Allenton replied; "I rung the bell, saw Mirabel, and told her what I had seen."

"She denied it—"

"She denied nothing. Her silence admitted the truth. She showed confusion, and refused to make any explanation. Of course that settled all; I informed her that we were done, and she did not demur. I left the house. In my chagrin and anger I told others what had happened, and was surprised to learn that the truth had been known to all but me for some time; others had seen that her wiles had fascinated her, and she intended to throw me over for a union which meant beauty and booty. That ended it; I left Liberty, took to the wild North Plains, and here I am."

"And the girl?" questioned Manchester.

Allenton hesitated.

"I know nothing further about her. I have tried to forget her with fair success, but the strange resemblance Asher bears to her has brought back the past vividly."

"As Asher is so young you can afford to ignore him, and thus save yourself painful recollections."

"I suppose so."

The return of Dark John, laden with game, interrupted the conversation, and the fact that Allenton followed the rover to the fire ended it, but Manchester remained standing by the entrance.

He had fresh food for thought. Allenton had sunk in his estimation, for he could not fully respect one who would pour his private affairs into a stranger's ears; but, nevertheless, he was glad he had heard the story.

It did not elevate Mirabel in his estimation. Deputy-Sheriff Elbridge had asserted that the girl had thrown the doctor over to marry a richer man, but the statement had never impressed Walter greatly; Elbridge was an unprincipled fellow, to whom falsehood was no object to be avoided. With Allenton it was different; he was an honorable gentleman.

How, then, was the scene he had witnessed in Granger's house to be construed without condemning Mirabel?

Disappointed and irritated, the hunter looked back to the group at the fire. Asher sat in the rear, leaning against a point of rock, his head resting upon his hand.

"The boy is a girl!" muttered Manchester, "and this resemblance which all see is more than chance. Wild as the idea seems, I hold to my opinion; I believe the lost Mirabel could be found, if wanted."

Hailstorm Harv was talking in his light-hearted way, and even the Gypsies yielded to

the power of his good humor enough to listen attentively. Asher smiled, and Allenton laughed aloud. Their frivolous mood jarred upon the hunter's nerves, which had been affected by the late story more than he willingly would have admitted, and, though well aware that such a step was reckless and might jeopardize the whole party, he turned and left the cave.

Passing along a level space which extended to the right he walked toward what Dark John had said was the wildest part of the hills. This was precisely where he wished to go; he wished to gain peace and consolation from Nature, and leave man where he would be unseen and unseeing, as far as he was concerned.

The hunter had acquired some knowledge of border-craft, and he took pains to leave no trail behind him.

He went on without regard to time or distance until, reaching a place singularly wild and beautiful, he sat down on a boulder and fell into deeper thought.

His meditations were brief and rudely interrupted. Suddenly a snake-like coil of something dropped over his head, and he was jerked backward and laid prostrate on the ground.

Readily recognizing the touch of a lasso he made an effort to rise, but was again flung back. Again he made the trial, but a heavy weight crushed him back and strong arms seized him. His weapons were torn away, and then, when given unobstructed view, he found himself surrounded by six men.

One of the party laughed boisterously.

"Say, mister, won't you stop with us awhile?" he asked, with fancied humor.

"Don't he make a prime acrobat, though?"

"More like a toad."

"Looks like his mammy's darlin'!"

These comments were made in the same vein as the first, but the sorry attempts at humor did not hide the one all-important fact from Manchester that he had fallen among ruffians of the worst class. He had been allowed to rise to a sitting position, and could see them plainly.

They were rough, brutal, unshaven and unshorn, and their garments were ragged and smeared with grease and dirt. Of the last-named articles a liberal coating was spread over their faces, but not generously enough to hide the fact that every evil passion known to man was pictured there.

"Git up, critter!" added the first speaker.

The hunter obeyed. He retained his calmness, and met their lawless glances coolly, but was consumed with anger against himself. In a moment of mental weakness he had left the cave, put his own life in jeopardy, and deprived his friends of a pair of strong arms in a possible hour of need.

Bitterly did he repent his folly.

"We've ketched a rare bird, boyees!" the leader continued.

"None o' the bosses is around; let's hev some fun with the varmint."

"S'pose you an' him hev a spugilistic display?"

"I don't want all the fun. Le's carry him ter the stream an' stan' him on his head in the water."

"Thar's a better way than that. Hyer's a rope, an' yonder is a tree. Why not play Jedge Lynch on him, an' let the critter dance a jig on nothin'. Hey?"

The other ruffians shouted their approval in chorus, and Manchester was seized and dragged toward the tree, the noose of the lasso still about his neck.

CHAPTER XXI.

IN THE GRASP OF THE NOOSE.

THE hunter was in the grasp of so many hands that resistance would have been useless, and he would not please them enough to make a vain struggle; but when the loose end of the lasso had been thrown over a limb, he, for the first time, broke the silence.

"Look here, men!" he pronounced, coolly, "I feel some interest in this case as well as you. Am I to have no word in the proceedings?"

"Not a whiffle!" the leading speaker declared.

"Anyhow, you can't rob me of my share in the proceedings, if you keep on this way."

"Wal, you're a cool blade!"

"Why not? Bordermen are built that way. I'm right off the same piece with you."

"You ain't one o' the allies."

"How do you know?"

"You're too dandified."

"Gentlemen, if dirt is the prime requisite, there is enough around here to make me as handsome as any of you."

"Oh! gammon, Red Rufe, why do yer waste time on the critter this way?" demanded another of the band. "Le's go on with the fun. We don't know how soon we'll be interrupted."

"That's true. Critter, you'll hev ter swing right away."

"Red Rufe, listen to me! Every man should have a fair show, and I hate to cheat you by monopolizing all of the interest of the seance. If you have a man in your party who is especially renowned as a fighter, I will meet him in any kind of a personal set-to. I assure you he

can get a lot of fun out of me while polishing me off. He can name his weapons; rifle, revolver, knife or bare fists will do me. I aim to please, and my only desire is to devote my few remaining minutes of troubled existence to amusing you and your amiable friends."

Manchester was not by any means a frivolous boaster, or a man to make light of death at such a crisis, but he knew enough of border character to be aware that, in dealing with such men, the only way to their better natures was through the road to their admiration.

Pity was a feeling unknown to them; courage they would appreciate if anything could touch them.

"We've struck a jewel," observed one. "It'll be rare fun ter make him squeal. Bet yer he tires us all out afore he loses his sand."

"Stranger, who be you?" asked Rufe.

"My name is Rifle-shot!"

"What are you doin' 'round hyer?"

"Trying to entertain you."

"Where be your friends?"

"Holding this rope."

"Say, Red Rufe, cut this short!" urged one of Red Rufe's followers. "The blamed critter is makin' game on us an' tryin' ter gain time. Mebbe he's got frien's near, an' they're liable ter swoop down on us an' spile our plant, any minute. I say, up with Mr. Rifle-shot while we kin. Eh, boyees?"

There was a chorus of approval, and Red Rufe gave way.

"All right, fellers; go in!" he directed.

"Isn't there a man here who dares to fight me?" demanded Manchester, aggressively.

The ruffian who had advanced the theory that the prisoner was trying to gain time was not far from right, though Walter's idea was that any desperate chance was better than to remain passive and have the gang carry out their scheme. His plan failed utterly; his last words brought only a jeering retort, and the rope was tightened.

A little more strength would have raised the hunter from his feet, but he was saved from what would have been the roughest experience of his career. A commanding voice sounded from the rocks:

"Hold, there!"

The rope relaxed, and no one looked with more interest to discover the speaker than the hunter. Taen he saw Deputy-Sheriff Elbridge hurrying forward with Ben Bragg and Ceph Peters at his heels.

"Drop that rope!" added Elbridge.

"Not fer you!" retorted Red Rufe, sharply. "Pull away, my bully boyees!"

"I tell you, let up!" shouted the deputy-sheriff, angrily.

"An' I tell you we won't! Meddle hyer an' out goes yer candle. By what right do you interfere—"

"Didn't you hear my bargain with your leader?"

"Yes; an' you're ter hev certain persons handed over ter you fer yer aid in the matter; but, blame it all, you can't go around an' pick up men fer your own use like apples under a tree. You hear me?"

"I do. Hear me! Your prisoner is one of the very persons I reserved, and I demand him from you. Refuse, and I'll complain to your leader of what is left of you after I and my men have whipped you blind."

"That's the warble!" agreed Ben Bragg. "Bargain or no bargain I've got a score ter settle with somebody fer the poundin' your slasher give me. I want ter do it bad. I'm a livin' instrument o' howlin' wrath and compressed electricity, an' I want ter lick somebody. Whoop! Yah-whoop!"

The redoubtable rough was still untamed. The broad light of day did not show him any handsomer. The wound on his head, which was still bandaged with the soiled cloth, had let out enough of his blood to create a slight pallor of the face and reveal a pair of eyes blackened as scientifically as a heavy blow could do it. Smarting under his recent rebuff at the hands of Hailstorm Harv, he wished to be avenged on somebody, and was not very particular as to the victim.

But Red Rufe did not oblige him.

"We've got ter take yer word," he grumbled, addressing Elbridge, "an' I'll only remind yer that the cap'n will set in judgment on the case. Ef you say so, hyer's your gambolin' antelope."

Sullenly enough he flung the loose end of the lasso to Elbridge, who then directed his gaze to Manchester. Gradually a smile appeared on the deputy-sheriff's face.

"Time rights all things, my hearty, and you see you and I meet on different footing than when at the town of Cottonwood Blaze. Then, you dealt me a cowardly blow; now, I have you in my power!"

"True; time brings changes. Now, I have a rope around my neck; anon, your turn will come, and the rope will be taut!"

This bold retort brought a jeering laugh from Red Rufe's men, who were angry at being robbed of their prey, and glad to see a point scored against Elbridge.

The latter took the prediction coolly.

"Empty talk! If we went on banking on the

future, where would we bring up? The final turn comes at last, and somebody gets badly left. I want to speak with you in private. Red Rufe, will you and your men fall back?"

"Nary fall! We owe duty ter the cap'n, an' only take his word ter let up on a certain line. You claim this man, but we hev no proof that he belongs ter you. We stick right by until we see the cap'n. Ef you want ter speak, do it; we won't hinder you."

Rufe's companions expressed their approval in concert, and Elbridge accepted the verdict.

"Manchester," he resumed, "where is Dark John?"

"I can't tell you."

"Do you claim that you don't know?"

"Yes."

"Then you speak falsely. You have been seen in his company, and you know where he is. Moreover, he is now hiding in these hills. I want to find him, and will make it worth your while to speak out. In brief, if you will tell me, your reward shall be liberty; but if you refuse, you return to the custody of Red Rufe and his men. They belong to the allied force, Indians and hunters, who are now on the war-path, and, as you are an enemy, no mercy will be shown you. Which shall it be—liberty or death?"

Manchester's lip curled scornfully.

"I admit nothing, but one thing I will say: Before I would act such a cowardly, contemptible part as to betray a friend I would welcome the noose and Red Rufe's rough hands!"

"Sentimental talk!"

"Call it what you will, but let us understand each other fully. You offer me freedom as the price of dishonor. This might be an alluring bait to a man without principle, but if a Judas were in my place now, and he could read you as I read, he would not betray his friends. He would know there would be no need of his hanging himself, for the very good reason that you would be ahead of him."

"If you mean—"

"You meditate treachery. Hatred for me would overbalance your word. Malice and duplicity gleam upon me from your eyes now. Were I to betray my friends I should seal my own doom!"

The prisoner stood erect and spoke with impressive dignity, and the accuracy with which he penetrated the deputy-sheriff's plans filled the latter with sudden passion.

"Have your own way, fool!" he cried. "You have rejected the chance offered you, and must take the consequences. Months have passed since you gave me a cowardly blow when I was doing official duty, but I have not forgotten it. Now, you are in my power, and I will have satisfaction full and bitter!"

"Ah! the cloven hoof shows. The officer of law sinks into insignificance, and the bully and ruffian rises from the folds of the mask. Elbridge, I like you better than ever before; an avowed foe is manlier than a cowardly enemy who strikes one in the back!"

The deputy-sheriff flushed with anger.

"Use your tongue while you can; I'll silence it presently!" he exclaimed.

The hunter turned to Red Rufe.

"You see he only robbed you of your prey in order to have a monopoly, himself."

There was no answer, but more than one of Red Rufe's followers bent an unfriendly glance upon Elbridge. The latter had not formed an alliance with the mongrel war-party until several collisions had occurred between them and his own men, and the former objected to the union both on that account and because, by taking Elbridge's party in, they not only lost just so many victims but gave the hand of fellowship to an officer of law.

All of the assurances of Captain Talcott—their leader—that Elbridge was, and would be, with them at heart, had not smoothed over their ill feeling.

Thus far they had obeyed orders and offered no violence to the unwelcome allies, but the alliance was young and the resentment of the original members might yet break out to somebody's harm.

CHAPTER XXII.

ANOTHER PRISONER COMES.

"We are now on the track of the runaways," observed Elbridge, addressing Ben Bragg and Ceph Peters. "This fellow would not venture far away from his friends, and a little careful work at this point will reveal the rest of the party. Ben, you will take the prisoner to Chapin, and then return and join me and Ceph."

"All right, yer Honor. I'll trot the critter over in the twinklin' of a mule's off leg, an' ef the spur is needed, the spur he gets."

"No violence, Ben!"

"I'm never voylent."

Roger hesitated, and then went close to the prisoner. Lowering his voice he added:

"Manchester, you may be able to guess why I want to find the Gypsy rover; I am still after the girl you saw at Cottonwood Blaze last fall, and believe Dark John can tell me. Possibly he may not be needed, if you are equally well informed. I give you my word of honor that if you will reveal her whereabouts you shall go free. Do you know where she is?"

The hunter experienced a feeling of relief. Whatever might be the truth in regard to Asher, Elbridge did not share the suspicion that the "boy" was Mirabel.

"If I knew I would not tell you, sir," was the frank reply, "but I've not seen the girl since last fall, myself. I have been told, however, that, after her escape, she went to reside with friends, and died shortly after."

There was so much sincerity in the speaker's manner that Roger was staggered, mentally, for a moment, but after a little meditation, he answered:

"You may believe the report, but I don't. I think she still lives, and that Dark John can reveal her whereabouts. Ben Bragg, take your man away."

"Come, critter!"

Ben took hold of the hunter's arm, and the latter went obediently. A turn around a rock took them out of sight of the other men.

"Have we far to go?" Walter asked.

"Not so far as you'd like."

"Benjamin, are you a rich man?"

"Ef I be I don't know it."

"How would you like to own a gold mine, and just sit down and cross your legs while your employees worked it?"

"Critter, don't be foolish! Me, own a gold-mine? Bah! Pooh! Stuff! How would I like ter be an angel?"

"The role would not fit you, Benjamin; the clothes would be too large. But we were speaking of money. Ah! Benjamin, what can compare with money and freedom!"

"Whisky an' terbacker," suggested Bragg.

"I have money, but I am out of freedom; my stock is all gone. It needs replenishing. Now, I'll give you five hundred dollars to set me free!"

"Put it thar, pard!"

The outlaw turned over a hand which showed a painful need of soap and water.

"Not so fast, my friend," Walter answered. "I never pay until I get my goods. Besides, I have no money with me. I can get it, though, and in a quantity to make your beloved tobacco and fire-water look cheap. All this I will give for freedom, Mr. Bragg. Chance has made you and me companions on this journey. Why can't we be useful to each other? You have not a bad nature; under an exterior of manly resolution beats a heart which is warm and friendly—to gold! Your sympathies are quick—with the cash which enables you to buy whisky. Ben, set me free and I'll give you five hundred dollars."

"Critter, you make me tired! Think I'm green grass, do yer? Think I'd take your word, eh? I won't b' mighty! Want ter get me into trouble, do yer? Want Cap'n Tom Talcott, o' the allies, ter string me up, do yer? Your game won't work, mister. Why won't it work? 'Cause it won't! Wah! wah!"

"Mr. Bragg, business is business. I offer you good money to liberate me. Do you refuse?"

"Bet yer life! Look at me, critter! See the red rag on my skull! See the beautiful pair o' black eyes I hev! Be I poooty?"

"Opinions differ. Candidly, though, I should say not."

"I got all them whacks by buckin' ag'in' Cap'n Tom Talcott's bullies, an' Tom says my next beauty-mark will be around the neck. See?"

"We wander. Set me free—"

"I won't! I say it, an' that settles it. Ben Bragg ain't no fool, an' don't yer think he is. Set you free? After you're hung I'll attend yer funeral; that's all I kin do for you. Now, shut up; when you tackle me you tackle a rock-ribbed patriot who won't sell his honor fer no money. Chaw on that, an' let me alone!"

They turned a point of rock and were in a sort of arena. Nature, perhaps tired of heaping rocks upon the long-suffering earth, had left an open space of nearly an acre, and it had been made into a camp. A series of huts, formed of stone, of bark, poles and mud, had an air of age which told that they were not of recent erection. Around these were scattered twenty men, nearly every one of whom appeared to have seen hard usage. There were bandaged heads, bandaged arms, hands and legs, and a more sorry-looking crowd it would have been hard to find outside of a hospital.

"Them is our wounded," explained Ben, "an' most on 'em was hurt in a tussle by the river-ford. Mebbe you remember it, critter?"

"No."

"It's a good time ter forget. I'm told that Dark John an' his gang fit like demons, an' I reckon you was thar. I wouldn't claim acquaintances with them, though, ef I's you."

"Rest easy, Mr. Bragg. It is only kindred spirits like you that I fall in line with."

"Drap it! I'd draw a revolver on you afore I'd help yer. Your style ain't mine, an' I hate you. If I's in Roger Elbridge's place I'd swing ye off without ceremony."

With this surly assurance Ben led his prisoner into one of the huts. He looked around and then growled:

"Old Chapin ain't hyer, but it's jest as wal; I kin tie you up. The only trouble is, the bully

boyees outside may take a fancy ter come in an' chaw you up. That's your lookout, not mine."

The speaker pulled Walter roughly over to one side and tied him to a stake which was set in the wall, the middle being in a recess and clear, but each end running into compressing and, apparently, cemented stones.

Bound as he was the hunter could not resist, and he was soon made perfectly helpless.

Ben only remained to dwell upon the idea last advanced, and in which he manifestly took great pleasure. He asserted that the crowd outside were very angry over their hard usage, and that there was no general officer in charge; and, hence, nothing to prevent them from coming in at any time to slay the prisoner. Then the outlaw went out, chuckling over his own fancied cunning.

Manchester could not doubt the danger, and realized what serious trouble would follow if any of the half-disabled knaves started the idea of violence, but, after satisfying himself that he could not burst his bonds, his thoughts turned from his own peril to other matters.

What of his friends?

Deeply he regretted having left the cave.

Elbridge had been shrewd enough to suspect that Dark John and his party were near, and the chances were that systematic search would soon result in their discovery.

The hunter was really amazed at his own folly.

Anxious to atone, in part, for his error, and reach the cave in time to take part in the fight if, as seemed probable, it came to that, he studied to see if there was any possible way of getting free. The wall beside him was of rock, pieces of various sizes having been fitted in together, and each end of the stake was so firmly fixed that his strength amounted to nothing when exerted against it.

A ray of light shone in between two stones, and, as the point was within reach, he managed to enlarge it until he could look out and have view of the maimed and bandaged outlaws.

They were a hard-looking lot—veritable dregs of the race they misrepresented, and worse than the Indians with whom they associated. Wounded as they were many were, able to fight hard, and he knew his life would be worth nothing if they chose to move against him.

He looked for Jonas Chapin in vain. Wherever the lawyer was he did not return, and hours passed away. Manchester fretted in captivity, but found no relief. He wondered what was being done at the cave, and imagination conjured up all possible scenes of misfortune.

The sun neared the horizon; its last rays quivered over the camp; the luminary sunk to rest. Twilight came, only to be succeeded by its darker brother, Night; and the red light of the fires now burning in the circle fell on the black rocks, the unsightly huts and the maimed knights of lawless life on the level.

Manchester, hungry, weary and discouraged, still waited for the appearance of his enemies.

Two figures appeared at the further side of the camp.

"Elbridge is coming," was the hunter's natural thought.

The two came nearer, and the firelight fell upon them more distinctly. One was of slight figure, and walked a captive by the side of his burly companion. Manchester's blood seemed to turn to ice.

The prisoner was Asher!

"Just Heaven!" groaned the hunter, "of all things why could I not have been spared this?"

The pair reached the center of the camp and paused where the light was the strongest. Asher was plainly revealed, and Walter saw that, though pale, the boy held his head well up and did not waver. The maimed ruffians, stiff and sore with their hurts, looked on in sullen indifference.

"Providence grant that they do not suspect the truth!" murmured Manchester, devoutly.

Asher's captor addressed several words to the wounded men, evidently seeking for information, and then came on toward the huts. It gave the hunter a grain of hope in the midst of the wretched affair when the door of his own prison was opened.

"Git in thar, Hop-o'-my-Thumb!" directed the captor, roughly. "You may thank my soft heart that I ain't eat you up afore now, but even your pipe-stem bones an' baby face won't save you when Cap'n Tom Talcott comes. Git in, an' chaw on the certain fact that you'll be a dead duck afore mornin'!"

Asher was pushed forward roughly, and then the door closed heavily behind him.

CHAPTER XXIII.

ELBRIDGE VIEWS THE BOY.

ASHER stood still. The hut was dark, and, except for the indistinct view he had gained of it when the door was open, he had no knowledge of the interior.

Manchester had remained very quiet while the outlaw was near, thinking it probable that his own presence was not known.

There was a rattling sound as the door was secured, and then the man walked out of camp again with long steps. The hunter spoke.

"Asher!"

"The boy started; Walter repeated the name.

"Who speaks?" asked Asher, hesitatingly.

"It is I—Walter Manchester."

"You! Thank heaven! I am not alone!"

The words burst from the boy's lips in a way which told of sincere joy and relief.

"Come nearer!" the hunter directed. "Are you bound?"

"My hands are tied behind my back."

"Have you a knife?"

"No; my weapons were taken away."

"Are our friends all captured?"

"Only myself. I wandered too far in the cave, lost my way, passed outside and was captured."

"Who was your captor?"

"I know not; I never saw him before. Oh! Mr. Manchester, is there no way in which we can escape?"

Asher had come close to the hunter. They could but dimly see each other, but the boy realized that Walter, too, was a prisoner. Despite the force of the last inquiry the new-comer was quite calm, and Manchester doubted if he was suffering so many fears for himself as crowded one after another in the hunter's mind.

The latter proceeded to explain exactly how he was secured, and how helpless he was. It was a question of whether Asher could free himself from his bonds.

"Your hands are small," Walter reminded; "can't you contrive to get out of the ropes upon them?"

"I will try, but the ropes are so tight they cut into my wrists. I am afraid it can't be done."

The boy made the attempt, but without success.

While he was thus occupied Manchester was busy with his thoughts. The fresh capture was a severe blow to him, and he feared the worst. Asher had been brought in by one of Captain Talcott's men, who, having no reason to give unusual attention to the youth, had not been influenced by his delicate appearance; but if Roger Elbridge had gained such accurate knowledge of Dark John's company, what would he surmise if once he saw the handsome boy?

Walter could hardly keep his composure. Asher's joy at finding a friend only bound the boy closer to him, while it awoke sharper, more painful fears, and made his own helplessness bitterly felt.

"Useless!" finally sighed Asher, as he ceased to struggle with his bonds.

"I am sorry to hear it. Could you but get free and liberate me, I think we would soon get out of the camp. Strong as the walls of our prison are, the roof is but a fragile covering, and the structure stands near the northern limit of the valley. This condition of affairs is painful."

"Tis horrible!" Asher agreed. "I dare not ask what we naturally may expect."

Manchester did not venture to answer.

"These men terrify me," confessed the boy, upon whom Walter's depression had effect. "They are brutality and lawless mischief personified. What will the night bring forth?"

The deep, quivering sigh which followed the last words was so like the forerunner of a fit of weeping that Walter was about to essay the role of comforter when a voice just outside the hut caused him to look anxiously out of a crevice in the wall.

Close by one of the fires stood three men, and his heart seemed to leap to his throat as he recognized Elbridge. It was not fear for himself, for no danger could be worse than the expectations harbored during each hour since his capture, but Asher—

Perspiration broke out over the hunter, and he wrenched at his bonds until the thongs cut his wrists and blood trickled down his strong but helpless arms.

Elbridge turned suddenly, came to the door, unfastened it and entered. Asher had half-unconsciously retreated to the furthest corner, and though the deputy sheriff carried a blazing brand from the fire, and swung it around his head to get full light, the boy was but dimly revealed.

Roger looked only at Manchester.

"So you're still here, eh?"

"I am still here."

Elbridge laughed loudly.

"Your voice trembles like that of a girl. Ha! ha! I thought I'd bring your long tongue under subjection; scared out of your wits, ain't you?"

"Scared!" retorted Walter, warmly. "I never yet saw a carrion crow or skulking wolf I was afraid of. Why should I begin now?"

"Your voice shook just the same. Solitude has been too much for you, it seems."

The use of the word "solitude" reminded Roger to look around and make sure it was properly introduced; he looked and saw Asher.

"Hullo! what kind of an animal have you here?"

He advanced a step, and Asher became more distinctly visible. Unknown to him his entrance had thrown the boy into a panic, and now he was cowering back in the corner, his face pale, his eyes dilated, and his whole aspect one of actual terror.

Again the deputy-sheriff laughed loudly.

"Upon my word! here's another like you, only more so. It's a boy, and the little fool is so scared that his knees and chin bump against each other like dice in a box. Be quiet, you kid! your wild eyes scare me! You are somebody's else prisoner and I won't eat you up, though you're such a trim-looking youngster that I'll have another look at you, later. If you have horse-sense I may buy you of the outlaws, if you'll enter my service and act a part I have in mind."

The torch, burning fitfully and waveringly, sent erratic gleams of light here and there, only to be sharply followed by bands of shadow, and the light and shade played so peculiarly upon Asher's face that, with the exception of his manifest terror, Roger could make but little of him while at that distance.

He turned back toward Manchester.

"I haven't found your gang yet."

"I am glad to hear it."

The hunter spoke nearly in his old manner. His relief was great now that Elbridge had failed to see anything familiar in Asher's face, and if the former would go away without further investigation, all might yet be well.

"But I have you," retorted Roger.

"I am aware of that."

"Now, see here, Manchester: you are a man of brains, and ought to act accordingly. It is not you I want at all, but Dark John and his wife. Listen to my proposition and use common sense. If you will guide me to where the Gypsies are concealed, you shall be set free. I swear it!"

"Unfortunately, your word does not go."

"Wait! You know why I want them. Last year I was in hot pursuit of Mirabel Wayland, and the infernal Gypsies beat me out; but I have devoted every day since to getting sight of her again. Think of it! Eight months of weary labor; of danger from men and beasts; of hardship from the bitter cold, from high-piled snows, from floods and from disease. Think of this and then take home the fact that I am in desperate earnest in the chase for Mirabel. Once you knocked me down—no pleasant thing for a man to endure; but you must realize that it is only a trifle compared with my passion to find Mirabel. To find her I must capture Dark John and Hagar, and force the secret of her hiding-place from them. Can't you see that, in order to accomplish my all-absorbing purpose, I will bury my trivial feud against you? Manchester, guide me to the Gypsies and you are a free man!"

The speaker was in earnest; desperately in earnest. It showed in every word, tone and gesture; yet it was as nothing to the volume that was revealed, as a whole.

At that moment Walter wondered if the deputy-sheriff was not a veritable monomaniac.

The hunter saw the need of caution.

"John has befriended me."

"So will I."

"Treachery would be ungrateful."

"Loyalty would be death!"

"Do not tempt me."

"Tempt you? I only ask you to choose between life and death."

Manchester pretended to waver.

"I must have time," he responded.

"How much?"

"Until morning."

"But night is the time best suited to taking an enemy by surprise. I can't agree to that."

"Give me until two o'clock, then."

"I will do it, but I warn you if this request covers any trick it will avail you nothing. You cannot escape. The allies are all about the valley; you are securely bound, and this boy—he paused and glanced at Asher—"shall be rendered as helpless as you."

"He is bound already," interposed the hunter, trying to appear careless.

"I will look to his bonds."

Elbridge walked quickly to Asher's side, while Manchester's fears again became active. Was it possible that the keen-eyed and suspicious deputy-sheriff would remain blind to the resemblance which had impressed men who had less at stake than he?

The handsome boy did not cower in the corner this time, but rose, turned, and put out the hands which were secured behind his back.

"Look for yourself!" he directed, with surprising coolness.

Roger tested the bonds.

"They are all right," he admitted, "and this boy seems to be a mere child."

He ran his gaze over the slender form, while Asher persistently kept his back turned.

It was a pause of painful interest.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A RISKY PLOT WITHIN A PLOT.

ELBRIDGE turned away.

"I have use for this youth if I can buy him of Captain Talcott. To those who know him, who ever they may be, he is a youngster with a dark face and straight, black hair. I would change all that; I would blacken his face and crimp his hair, and pass him off for a negro. Even if Dark John has ever seen him he would not be

recognizable in that disguise. Once you tell me the hiding-place of the Gypsies, I would send this boy to them; he should pretend to be a fugitive; they would receive him, and he, watching his chance, could render their rifles useless and their capture easy. You see, they have several men, as I know, and caution is often wisdom."

"An elaborate plan," observed Manchester.

"Boy, would you do it?"

Quickly Asher answered:

"Not unless you paid me for it!"

The deputy-sheriff laughed aloud.

"You are no fool, boy. Well, I would pay you, and give you freedom, besides."

Again he turned to the hunter.

"You see, both of you can win liberty by a little common sense. I'll leave you alone for now, but you may expect a man at eleven o'clock, and then once every hour, to ask how your decision comes on."

The speaker turned and went out.

Manchester breathed a deep sigh of relief. Trouble had been averted for the time—how? He believed it to be a fact that if Asher had not turned his back when the deputy-sheriff went forward, discovery would have followed. Had this been done by accident or design? The coolness of the boy at the crisis led his friend to believe that, rallying from terror, Asher seized upon the one hope left him, and neatly foiled Roger by design.

And the work had been cleverly done.

"Who is this knave who wants me to betray my own father?"

Asher asked the question so naturally that Walter was staggered for a moment. Was he wrong? Was Asher what he seemed, and nothing more?

The question received no answer.

"You seemed to agree," the hunter observed.

"I thought there might be hope in it."

"Have you a plan?"

"I don't know; but if we could deceive that man so as to get leave to go to the cave, not separately but together, we could escape and, also, outwit him as he was never outwitted before."

"In its entirety, the scheme would never work; I should not be allowed to go. I should be held until he had his game in hand."

"Then it is useless to think of it."

"I'm not so sure of that. Let me meditate! Elbridge has unwittingly put an idea forward which may be our salvation and his utter defeat. We must consider it."

This was done, and every point carefully discussed, but, plan as they might, there was always a strong element of uncertainty. It was easy to figure out victory if all went well, but to arrange the game so that all was sure to go well, or even to promise success, was found to be impossible when so much depended upon the course Elbridge would take.

One thing Walter insisted upon—that Asher should think only of himself, and regain the shelter of the cave at all hazards, leaving the hunter to the questionable mercy of his enemies.

Asher objected to this strongly, even vehemently; but Manchester was firm. By advancing the idea that his only hope lay in revealing his situation to Dark John and Hailstorm Harv, he at last succeeded in carrying the point.

Promptly at the designated hour came the messenger, and the answer was ready.

"Tell Elbridge that we accept his terms."

"He is now outside the camp," returned the messenger, "but I have my orders, so I'll make the boy inter a nigger."

He grinned as he spoke, and then added:

"It's a queer place for such work, but it won't be my first experience. I have done jobs like it before, an' I'll turn you out the poorest colored gent you ever see. The tools is all ready; I'll be back direckly."

He went out, leaving Walter and Asher in a state of great anxiety. Vast, indeed, was the point hazarded on the cast of the die, and no other way of escape seemed open to them. Manchester was troubled by one grave doubt which he did not mention to Asher. Not knowing just what steps would be pronounced necessary to metamorphose Asher into a colored boy, he was afraid there would be some requirement which, for obvious reasons, would block the whole game from the start.

"You do not seem sanguine," remarked the boy.

The hunter aroused from thought with a start.

"We need not delude ourselves," he responded. "It is a desperate game to play, but if you escape I shall be content."

"No, more, no more!" Asher exclaimed, "why should I be favored at your expense?"

"Because your life is more precious—"

"And why more precious?"

Manchester was slow in answering.

"You are young—"

"What of yourself? You are but a few years my senior, if I am weak and insignificant. What am I compared with a man, young, strong, honorable?"

The boy rose impulsively, went to Walter's side and rested one of his bound hands on his companion's arm.

"Hunter," he said, with emotion, "we are to take great risks to-night, and no one knows what will be the result. Perhaps we shall both perish; perhaps both will escape; or it may be one will fall, and the other go free. If it be the last, I hope he who secures life and liberty will not be the wandering youth of the dusky skin!"

"Stop! Do not estimate too lightly a life given you by one who knows better than you when to take it. We cannot measure our lives, for only the one giver and our friends can properly value them."

"It was not of myself I was thinking," Asher answered, in a low voice. "I thought of you! Hunter, we cannot mark our acquaintance by years, but the honest man who has been kind to the boy of Gypsy blood—who has always been good to me—is too valuable a feature of this world to die while he is still young. Whatever happens to me, I pray you may escape!"

The clear tones had grown tremulous, and Manchester's pulse beat quicker than was its custom.

"Asher," he replied, deeply moved, "for all I have done for you, you are sincerely welcome. I wish it had been more, and will say now that whenever I can add to my efforts I shall be glad."

"Even for the wild Gypsy?"

"Even so."

Asher hesitated, and it was plain there was much in his mind unsaid; but he finally turned away abruptly.

"You are kind," he remarked, in a changed voice—a voice almost as curt as Dark John's in his ungracious moods.

The boy sat down and silence prevailed in the room until a rattling outside was followed by the opening of the door and entrance of the recent visitor. He carried a kettle in each hand, and, when he had set them down, received a blazing brand from a second man outside.

"Come forth, colored gent!" he uttered, humorously.

Asher looked at the substance in one of the kettles, which was of the hue of ink.

"I hope I am not to have much of that smeared over me," he observed, somewhat nervously.

"It only goes on your hands, face an' neck. Don't get an arton flustered, fer thar ain't no need of it, an' the stuff will wash off easy enough. I'll take yer hair, first."

Asher resigned himself to the care of the outlaw, and was duly amiable, but some signs of perturbation were still manifest. Manchester watched with attention which partook of both fear and jealousy, but he, like the boy, had no cause for apprehension.

With the aid of a hot iron and some unknown liquid the master of ceremonies soon transformed the straight black hair into a crinkly mass which so changed Asher's appearance that he seemed to be another person.

The next step was not so pleasant, but, as the man was not too lavish with his black mixture, he had soon spread it on scientifically. The liquid used on the hair seemed to be a general and universal aid to art, for he gave Asher's face, neck and hands a coating over the black mixture.

"That's ter harden it," he explained.

Then he stepped back, surveyed his work and burst into a hearty laugh.

"Ever see a better colored gent than that? Kin old Afrikay beat it? Sonny, was your parents slaves? Do you admit relationship to Ham? Say, pard, how's that?"

The last question was addressed to Manchester, who did not hesitate to express admiration of the outlaw's work. No art could give Asher heavy features or thick lips, such as naturally would be looked for in a negro as black as he, but, otherwise, the success was pronounced.

The hunter breathed a sigh of relief. The work was done, and, now, Elbridge would be very sharp-sighted to see, even in the strongest light, any similarity between the alleged Gypsy boy and the girl of Cottonwood Blaze.

"Job's done," quoth the artist, "an' I'll take my affidavit that you'll fool the enemy. I'm so sure of it that if I feel the need of exercise, I'll go out later an' dig graves fer them."

It was something of a disappointment to find that an outlaw who was so jolly was as much of a villain as the rest of the party, but he proved it by other remarks in the same vein as the last.

He looked at a battered old watch he carried.

"Reckon we may as well go along," he added. "Roger will be findable now, and time is precious. Of course, mister," to Walter, "you will be kep' tied up as fur as yer hands go. We hev ver word, but won't act like lambs with yer. I'll come back with the boys, an' we will bring matters ter a crisis in a few shakes. Thar's a heap o' fun ahead!"

He left the prison.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE CRISIS AT THE HANGING ROCK.

The hunter and Asher regarded each other earnestly. Neither thought of the latter's grotesque appearance; more weighty matters were on their minds.

"Let me caution you," directed Walter, in a low voice, "to exhibit no anxiety for me. We are supposed to be utter strangers, and a light and careless air must mark your every word and movement. Also, when I go through the force of pointing out the way you must go to reach Dark John's cave, leave us slowly and carefully, not as if you knew the way."

"I comprehend."

"I shall take Elbridge to a place where there is a gigantic rock held high in air between two cliffs—"

"I know the place."

"Thank fortune for that! Can you find the way from there?—it is some distance from the cave."

"I can find the way easily."

"Of course I cannot take the deputy-sheriff any nearer the refuge, or he would afterward find it alone."

"Certainly not. I see your plan; by leading to the hanging rock you betray nothing."

"Exactly."

"Once there," continued Asher, quickly, "I will go to Dark John and Hailstorm Harv, and have them come and rescue you."

"If they think it safe."

"If? Do you think we would be so base as to leave a comrade in peril?"

"The safety of the whole party must not be imperiled for me. Better leave me—"

"It must—it shall! Say no more, hunter; I would despise those men if they did not risk all for their friend and ally!"

Asher's eyes flashed and his delicate hand was clinched. His changeable nature was always of absorbing interest to Manchester. Now he exhibited weakness almost akin to cowardice; anon, his manner became bold and heroic. That the latter was what his nature really was Manchester fully believed, and he accounted for the periods of weakness by the inference that the weight of trouble and discouragement now and then became overpowering.

Conversation was interrupted by the return of the outlaw, who was accompanied by several other men.

Manchester was wholly freed from bonds with the exception of his hands, which were left as before.

The party left the prison and the camp, proceeded along the rocky ridge and finally arrived at their destination. Elbridge was not there, but he soon made his appearance. He inspected Asher, and expressed satisfaction.

"Now, boy," he cautioned, "I want a clear understanding. I have confidence in you, and believe you will be faithful—"

"I will, if you pay me well," interrupted the boy, adhering to his former policy.

"You shall be well paid; not only for this work, but I will attach you to my service regularly, and you shall have good clothes, a horse of your own, weapons, and a pocket full of money."

"Colonel, I reckon you and I shall get along famously!"

Even Elbridge laughed at what seemed to be the eagerness of a sharp youth who rated his own advancement above honor, and the deputy-sheriff's confidence increased.

"We will go on," he decided. "Remember my instructions now. There are several men with Dark John, and hard fighters, as Captain Tom Talcott's followers have learned to their cost. I want to cripple them before making the attack, so I wish you to tamper with their weapons, as I said before. I am almost tempted, at this moment, to make the attack boldly, and at once—"

"Don't yer do it!" cried Ben Bragg. "They'd kill about ten on us, an' you, an' me, an' Ceph, would be among the dead."

"Correck!" Ceph agreed.

"You are right," returned Roger, who, plainly, did not care to defy the rifles of the fugitives. "You shall go alone, boy; they will take you in as an escaped fugitive; you can tamper with their rifles, and then, when sleep overpowers most of them, creep out and come to me."

There was considerable more talk on the subject, for Elbridge was well aware that the plan had its weaknesses; but Dark John and his men had won such a reputation for sagacity and valor, in their struggle against Talcott's men, that the deputy-sheriff did not care to creep upon their camp and invite almost certain death.

When Roger had freed his mind fully, Manchester, by his command, led the way to the hanging rock. Then the latter gave directions to Asher how to find the cave. If any one had followed these directions the cave never would have been found, but Elbridge drank in every word greedily, and the bogus negro appeared to do the same.

"Now, go!" Roger directed, "but beware how you go back on me. If you prove faithless, this man"—here he motioned to the hunter—"dies before another sun sets, and you—well. I'll hunt you down if it takes a year, and hang you up by your heels!"

This was said to arouse due respect and fear in Asher's mind, and the boy hastened to avow his loyalty.

"Then go!" the leader directed.

Asher went, while Walter watched with painful interest. The boy showed no undue haste in getting out of sight, but picked his way carefully and coolly. For a few moments he was visible, and then the darkness which hung heavily over the tall, pillar-like rocks hid him from view.

Manchester's spirits rose. Asher was gone, and by following, not the false directions given in Elbridge's hearing, but those carefully explained in the hut, the youth was almost certain of reaching the cave in safety.

From that moment the hunter was a different man, figuratively speaking. Whatever happened to him, Asher was saved.

By the deputy-sheriff's direction all sat down, and a period of waiting began. The men, with the exception of Roger and the prisoner, conversed, Ben Bragg being especially loud and domineering. Elbridge often looked at Walter. The latter could not read his expression in the darkness, but was sure there was no good will in it.

He felt also positive that the lawless officer of law never would willingly forego vengeance for the blow received at Cottonwood Blaze, and that treachery and violence were in his mind.

It was another anxious period of waiting for Walter. Eager as he had been to put Asher's interest before his own, he was not indifferent to his individual safety. Far from it! He was young and life was dear to him. Believing the boy to be safe, he was keenly alive to his own precarious situation.

Would help come?

Would an attack be successful?

What was that sound?

Manchester was almost sure there was a noise among the rocks. Did it herald relief?

His strained eyes saw a dark object rise for a moment into view, and then sink silently down. It was like a human head and his pulse beat faster. Had help come?

Two dark forms sprung over the rocks and rushed upon the outlaws. It was a distance of only a few feet, and, before alarm could hardly seize upon the hunter's captors, Elbridge was felled by a blow from a clubbed rifle.

A man ran to Walter's side and deftly cut his bonds.

"Fight, my hearty!" he directed, thrusting forward a knife.

It was Hailstorm Harv!

Manchester reached out for the weapon, but some one ran against him, and he and Harv were separated.

"Whoop! I'll do you up, critter!" cried a hoarse voice.

The hunter saw a revolver aimed at his breast, and the burly form of Ben Bragg was back of it. No time was to be lost, and Manchester proved equal to the emergency. With his left hand he knocked the revolver aside; then, following the stroke with his whole weight, he struck outlaw Ben in the face with force which made that luckless ruffian disappear from view over a boulder, which obstructed his heels, as if fired from a catapult.

Then Walter turned to see the other men in a confused struggle where it was hard to tell friend from foe, but the end was near. A few blows followed and, besides the hunter, no one was left standing but Hailstorm Harv and Dark John.

"This way, old man!" cried Harv, in his usual cheerful way. "We've got ter hustle while we can!"

Manchester needed no urging. The tremendous efforts of his friends had placed all of the enemy out of the way for the time, and it was a chance not to be missed. Side by side the trio ran toward the south.

"Is Asher safe?" demanded Walter.

"Safe and sound!"

Not another word was spoken until they were in the cave, where Asher, Hagar and Doctor Allenton were found awaiting them anxiously. A load was lifted from every heart as they saw themselves reunited, and impulsive Harv shook hands all around.

"A neat little job, if I do say it!" he declared.

"You have sustained your reputation, comrade."

"And you've made yours, Walt! I saw you smite a big feller hip an' thigh—or mostly in the eyes—an' old Samson couldn't had done the Philistine up han'somer."

"It was Ben Bragg."

"He will never brag of this encounter! I'm proud ter know ye, Walt."

"But I feel chagrined over my record. I left the cave in a way which was childish folly—worse; it was criminal folly—and was captured like an owl in daytime. It was simply an idiotic piece of work on my part—"

Asher significantly interrupted:

"Where would I be now had you not been captured before me?"

"That's a timely reminder," declared Harv.

"True, true; I was overlooking that point."

"Even in the wilderness," added the guide, his jovial manner changing to one of sober reverence, "Providence watches over us, an' shapes events for our good. Providence led you ter be rash simply so you could rescue this boy. He needed jest your help. His delikit arms—"

"We talk idly," interposed Dark John, curtly. "Let us prepare for the attack that is sure to come."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE SKULKER IN THE CORRIDOR.

BRUSQUE as the rover's interruption was, there was really but little the defenders of the cave could do to add to the strength of their position, but Dark John led the men close to the main entrance and bade Manchester tell his story fully; while Asher, after a few low words with Hagar, moved away with his alleged mother.

Walter had barely finished the account when Asher and Hagar returned, and the temporary colored boy had disappeared. The quivering light of the fire showed the old hue on Asher's cheeks.

"Safe an' sound!" quoth Hailstorm Harv, "but it was a close call. When the youngster come scootin' in hyer, like a section off from an eclipse, I thought the enemy had us in his grip, but Asher put up them two little hands o' his'n—"

"Talk to the point!" ungraciously directed John.

"I'm doin' it, an' so did Asher. With clasped hands he cried out: 'Fur the love of Heaven, save Walter! Save him! save him!' I swear ter gracious, the boy's voice was just like a gal's—"

"Nonsense!" again interrupted the rover. "You were so startled that your ears deceived you. The long and short of it is, Asher told us what the situation was and we rescued you. Say no more about it; a Gypsy always does his duty!"

Dark John was in his usual sullen and abrupt mood, but Manchester thought he knew why the rover was not willing to let Harv linger on Asher's "delicate arms," "little hands" and girl-like voice.

The big guide took the reproof in perfect good humor.

"Anyhow, there must be weepin' an' gnashin' o' teeth outside," he observed, laughing. "Never heard of a more comicaler thing than Elbridge's sendin' Asher here as he did. Ha, ha!"

He was not the only one who laughed, but Dark John shook his head.

"We have stirred up a hornets' nest. Of course Elbridge has no proof that he was betrayed by his boy agent, but we have beaten him again and he will rage like a tiger."

This indisputable fact made the garrison anxious for the future, and no one ventured to sleep for hours. Finally, by the rover's command, all but himself and Hailstorm Harv lay down, and even the danger did not prevent them from soon falling asleep.

No attack occurred during the night.

Dark John, thoughtful as ever, cooked breakfast before day fairly dawned, and then extinguished the fire. No wreath of smoke, however small, must ascend after daybreak to betray them.

Another period of anxious waiting and watching began for those who had slept. The little party was, by its own size, lost in the cave. An army might have found shelter there, and a safe refuge, too; but our friends could neither block up nor, in case of attack, defend the many entrances. In fact, the cave, so called, was not properly a cave.

Outside, when one moved about it was through passages among otherwise solid rocks, the sides being often so regular as to suggest the idea that, at some far distant period in the past, the compact cliffs had been riven by Titanic force, and gaps formed all sizes and shapes.

It was the same in the refuge, except that a roof of rock was over all, and apartments and corridors existed there like those of a vast building. Unluckily, many of these corridors led to the outer world, and were means of entrance open to any one who might find them.

Asher had taken opportunity to thank the hunter fully and earnestly before retiring, but, after the day began, he baffled all of Manchester's efforts to speak privately with him; if not by design, certainly with great aid from chance.

Dark John, usually so calm, so suddenly indifferent, walked about uneasily. Walter joined him.

"What do you think of the prospects, friend John?" the hunter asked.

There was no immediate reply.

"This place is not safe," the rover finally admitted.

"We seem to be anchored to it."

"Are you sure?"

"I am not an expert, but so it looks to me."

"I am considering the advisability of leaving."

"Can it be done?"

"We came here."

"Through danger, trouble and fighting."

"As well to go the same way as to remain here in danger, trouble and fighting."

"I judge you have a definite plan?"

"If we are let alone until another night I think we had better improve the chance to go."

"I have great faith in your judgment, but fear we cannot pass through the enemy's lines."

"There is great danger, I freely admit, but is it greater than here? Further flight will not be

expected; in that fact lies our hope. Elbridge now knows we are near, and he will do his utmost to find us. Sooner or later he will succeed. Shall we remain to meet him?"

"As usual, your reasoning is sound."

"'Tis the toss of a coin what would befall us if we tried to pass their lines. Talcott's outlaws and the Indians are many in number; they swarm everywhere, or did, but the few hunters to be found this way cannot long satisfy their thirst. They will go south; they may have gone already. The way may be more open than we think, but of one thing we are sure—Elbridge thinks only of us!"

"His malice and persistence are surprising."

The rover did not answer.

"I think you once told me," added Walter, lowering his voice, "that Mirabel Wayland died."

"Yes."

"Are you sure of it?"

"Yes!"

The rover's calm indifference was unmoved.

"If she were now near us she would be in great danger."

"I suppose so."

"With a woman to defend we could be braver, wiser, more determined."

"Opinions differ," John observed, in a surly voice.

"I wonder why it is that Asher so strongly resembles Mirabel?"

Dark John did not waver before the hunter's keen scrutiny.

"I see no resemblance. Is the fever in your head?"

"There is no fever, but this I will say, John. If Mirabel is near us, *in disguise*, the fact should not be kept from those who would gladly risk life for her; who would be far more zealous if they knew she was in peril."

"I do not understand all of your rambling talk, and should advise you to seek medical advice of the doctor. Your mind is not right. Try to realize"—John's voice took on the old, cold sneer—"that the girl is dead. The dead do not walk, and if they did, the girl—Mirabel, did you call her? Yes, I believe that was her name—would not associate with the outlaws, where she must be in order to be near us. Listen!"

The rover had spoken in his most offensive, rudest manner, and when he suddenly grasped Manchester's arm and made an imperious gesture to command silence, the latter thought his listening attitude only a farce.

Suddenly, however, John made another sharp gesture and, with noiseless steps, entered the corridor near which they stood.

Chagrined at the way his well-meant advice had been received, and angry because of his companion's uncurbed insolence, Walter stood in indifference to John's movements until suggestive sounds reached him from the corridor—sounds like those of a struggle.

The hunter raised his rifle quickly. The corridor led to one of the numerous entrances, and the rover might have discovered an enemy.

Before Walter could do more, John reappeared, dragging some object which struggled so fiercely that dust and dirt flew in all directions, and the captor was kept busy.

With a final effort John flung his prisoner over on his back, and then drew a revolver so that, when the latter struggled up to a sitting position, he looked at the yawning muzzle of the weapon.

The prisoner was Ben Bragg, looking even worse than before. In addition to the rag already around his luckless head, a second had been tied around so that it crossed his face diagonally, shutting one eye out of sight entirely. The visible optic, which was surrounded with discolored flesh, beamed balefully upon the men who confronted him.

Then he took a second look at the revolver, and wound up by smiting the earth with his huge fist.

"Durn the luck!" he almost shouted; "durn the mean, sneakin', measly, gol-dashed luck!"

Manchester smiled. Mr. Bragg certainly had struck a vein of misfortune, and, having often been struck himself, of late, looked as if he had been in a protracted prize-fight.

"Rattlesnakes an' mules' hind-legs!" pursued Benjamin. "Centipedes an' sicknesses! Tarantulas an' tigers' claws! Scorpions an' pisoned arrers! Starvation an' widders' tears! I've played in hard luck afore, but nothin' like this! Hang the lousy, hang-dog, sneak-thief, canker-in' luck! Drat the star I se born under, anyhow!"

He continued to hammer the ground with his fist, while his racket drew all the other members of the party to the scene. Finally he quieted down and turned the gaze of his lone eye upon Dark John.

"Can't ye do somethin' more!" he demanded.

"What do you want?"

"Want ter be licked! I'm used, o' late, ter bein' thumped once an hour, an' when I hev a doctor, I take my bitters reg'lar. Thar's summat left o' me yit—a few melancholy pounds o' mangled meat; an' you'll oblige me by lettin' a dornick fall on my head. My luck is on, an' I'll go the whole figger, b' mighty! Bring on a grizzly an' let me be chawed up. Do!"

Mr. Bragg wiped a tear from his blackened eye, but winced as he touched the tender flesh, and quickly withdrew his hand.

Dark John found no interest in his lamentations, and cut them short by sharply demanding:

"What were you sneaking around here for?"

CHAPTER XXVII.

BEN BRAGG'S REVELATION.

BEN made a grimace.

"Didn't I come in boldly an' openly?" he asked. "Ef I didn't it was your fault, fer you introduced me."

"Has Elbridge found us?" Dark John continued.

"No; but I hev!"

"Where is he?"

"Outside, roarin' like a buff'ler bull. He feels about as sour over bein' done up by you as man kin, an' is rushin' about like mad, tryin' ter git his optics on yer."

"He had better forego the pleasure."

"You might go out an' tell him so."

"He can find me by coming here."

"Yes."

Bragg answered mechanically. His gaze had wandered to Asher, and he was studying the boy's face attentively. He tried to scratch his head, to quicken his wits after the fashion of tradition, but found too many bandages in the way. In the conversation which followed he often glanced at Asher, and, now and then, at the Gypsies, as if comparing their looks with the boy's.

"You have gotten *your* bullet head into trouble!" observed Manchester, abruptly.

"Mister, I hev; my bullet head is always inter trouble. It was so a few hours ago, when you knocked me over a rock as big as a liquor-saloon. Et knocked me completely silly, that poke did. I owe you one!"

Ben's lonesome eye glared fiercely upon the hunter, and it was plain that resentment burned warmly in his breast. He had been roughly used so often, of late, that he was eager to have satisfaction on somebody.

He was questioned at considerable length, and answered so frankly that, if he told the truth in all things, they soon had an accurate picture of affairs outside.

When he, Elbridge and the other men, recovered from the punishment meted out to them by Walter's rescuers, the deputy-sheriff had been in a great passion. He suspected at once that the bogus negro had betrayed them, though nothing in Ben's remarks indicated that Roger had any further light in regard to the identity of the boy.

That hot-headed leader had again set his men to work, bidding them explore every nook and corner of the hills, and Ben Bragg had obeyed the order so well that he had come to grief.

All through this explanation he sat on the floor, and the additional bandages, bruises and dirt made him an object upon which dilapidation had come to breaking the record.

When Dark John had satisfied his curiosity he bound the prisoner, and stowed him away in one of the alcoves near the fire.

"Will you stand guard over him for awhile?" the rover asked, addressing Allenton.

"Willingly; though I wish we had some disinfectant to sprinkle upon him," the doctor replied. "The man has fallen in line literally with, 'Dust thou art, to dust returnest'; but, unlike the average man, he has made the great change out of time; although not dead he is mysteriously mixed with dirt."

Ben did not resent these remarks, and took his captivity coolly. Once in the alcove he abruptly asked:

"Got any o' the weed, stranger?"

"I may have."

"I'd like a chaw. Am about out, myself, an' wot I hev ain't handy. Cut off a hunk an' ram inter my mouth."

The cool assurance of the man amused his guard, and led the latter to comply with his request. Ben worked his jaws energetically.

"One good turn deserves another. You are Doctor John Allenton, ain't yer?"

"Yes."

"Queer gang, you've got hyer."

"In what way?"

"How erbout that spindle-shanked boy?"

"The boy is all right."

"The boy is! Hum! Ha! Yes, yes!"

"You seem amused about something."

"I be; I'm tickled clean through. *Boy!* Yes, yes; *boy!* He's a condemn'd funny *boy!*"

"I begin to think whisky has taken away your senses."

"Ain't had no whisk', an' ain't blind, neither. You be! Thunder an' widders' tears! be you stone, stark, starin' blind?"

"You will have to give a dictionary with your remarks."

"Don't see nothin' familiar erbout the boy, eh?"

A change appeared in the doctor's face.

"If you have anything to say, come to the point."

"When I see the youngster in the timber,"

proceeded Benjamin, "his face struck me forcible. Whar had I seen it afore? Et wa'n't easy ter say, fer I'd been all the way from the Mississipp ter Puget's Sound, an' I couldn't place it. I see him ag'in since I come here this time, an' the truth finally hopped at me like a panther on its prey. Doctor, be you blind?"

Allenton moved uneasily, and glanced around to make sure no one was listening.

"What did you discover?" he asked, in a low voice.

"I diskivered that the boy was a girl!"

The doctor's face flushed.

"A girl! What girl should be here? Why should any girl be in boy's clothing?"

"Don't argy ag'in yer own mind, old man: the facts has popped inter yer noddle, ez big ez Pike's Peak. You know what gal the boy is, an' whar you've seen her afore. The gal ain't no stranger ter you!"

Allenton gazed at Ben Bragg in dumfounded silence. Asher's face had haunted him from the beginning, but the nearest he had come to suspecting the truth—if Ben had advanced an idea that was correct—was to suspect that Asher was of the same blood as Mirabel Wayland. The new idea came with striking force. The boy, a girl? For a moment the theory seemed wild almost to the limit of impossibility, but events of the past wheeled into line to confound the arguments of cool, practical reasoning.

He wondered now at his own want of discernment in the past, and all the more so because he was a physician. The slender figure of the youth; his small hands and feet, his handsome, refined face, and other signs, had made the doctor wonder without grasping the truth.

Asher was a girl! Belief flashed upon Allenton, nor did it stop at that point.

How about the singular resemblance to Mirabel?

Ben Bragg laughed as he saw the impression he had made.

"Kinder knocks you silly, don't it?" he chuckled.

"Can you prove what you allege?"

"Prove it? Say, do you want a house ter fall on yer? Prove it! When you see a river flowin' you know thar is water there, don't yer?"

Asher and Hagar walked through the cave. They did not look toward the alcove, but were for several moments within sight of the doctor. He did not miss the chance to look.

"Fool! blind fool!" he muttered, in disgust.

"You see, boss, I've done you a good turn. One good turn deserves another. Ef you'll loosen these strings an' artom on my wrists I kin pull my hands out, slip out o' the cave an' be a free wild flower o' the wilderness, ag'in."

"I would sooner see you hanged!"

Speaking irritably, Allenton walked to the limits of the alcove and sat down. He wanted to be alone—to think. Such a revelation could not lose its force at once, and his mind was in a whirl. If Mirabel was near he would gladly have been a hundred miles away, himself. He was an honorable man, but not one to forget a real or fancied wrong easily. His resentment against Mirabel had never been stronger than at that moment when, after time had dulled his bitterness somewhat, the old trouble was brought back so vividly.

Ben Bragg watched with a cunning twinkle in his lone eye.

He had failed to convince Allenton that he had won a right to liberty, but, judging other men by his standard, he thought he had sown seeds that would promote discord in the party.

Presently, Hailstorm Harry came to relieve the guard, and Allenton walked toward the fire. Hagar was sitting with closed eyes, apparently asleep, but Asher and Manchester stood side by side, talking together.

Asher had never been in a more agreeable mood than then, and he was smiling and, it seemed, jesting, while his gaze, as it rested upon the hunter's face, was friendly.

The doctor experienced a thrill of jealousy, nor was he relieved when he saw the result of his appearance. Catching sight of him, Asher's smile suddenly died out and his lips ceased to form words. He began to examine his revolver with a very poor show of careless ease.

Replying curtly to some remarks made by Walter, Allenton sat down near the fire. He wanted a chance to observe Asher, but was frustrated.

After answering Manchester uneasily two or three times—though the hunter, also showing some hesitation, and glancing at the doctor, made only trivial remarks—Asher threw his rifle across his arm and spoke in a way intended to be resolute and manly:

"I think I'll scout about the cave a little. I may find another interloper, and add to our prisoners."

A sneer curled Allenton's lips and a retort trembled on the threshold of utterance, but he curbed the impulse and said nothing. His good will toward Manchester had not increased. Now, he could see that, from the first, the latter had blocked all his efforts to penetrate the mystery—often, with stubbornness which went to the absurd.

Now, too, he leaped to the conclusion that

Walter had known the truth from the beginning, and that only he was deceived.

Allenton was not an amiable companion after that.

During the day there was constant vigilance in the cave. Hailstorm Harv or Dark John was always on the alert, which meant a good deal; both were veterans at the work before them.

The dreaded attack did not come, nor were prowlers seen about the cave; but Harv and the rover, after careful consideration of the subject, decided that it was only a matter of time when their refuge would be found. Elbridge knew they were near, and would not relax his efforts.

Dark John announced the decision at twilight.

"To-night, we leave the cave!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A STARTLING DISCOVERY.

AN hour before midnight the horses were brought into the cave, saddled, bridled and made ready for the journey. Hailstorm Harv had been out and scouted in his usual skillful way. He had found Elbridge and his companions in camp, evidently wearied by the day's work, and so close to the refuge that the decision to leave seemed a very wise step.

Another day's search almost surely would reveal the hiding place to the enemy.

At two different points burning fires marked the locality of other camps, but Harv had seen nothing to indicate that Talcott's men were active, or out in great force. The natural inference was that all had left the vicinity except a few who, perhaps, had been hired by Elbridge.

Leaving the cave by a corridor at the southern side, the little party began their perilous journey. Dark John led the way on foot, to reconnoiter and avoid danger, if possible, while Hailstorm Harv went at the head of the riders.

The night was well suited for the work. There was no moon, and, while the starlight would have been dangerous in an open country, the many cliffs partially offset this drawback. Now and then the riders went in light too strong to please them, but, as a rule, towering rocks left their path in deep shadow.

Doctor Allenton was one of the most dissatisfied members of the party. It had been deemed advisable to take Ben Bragg along with them, and he and the doctor brought up the rear. Ben had no horse, so he was given John's, and with bound hands he was led by Allenton, whose duty was to hold the loose end of the lasso that was tied around Ben's waist, and see that the latter gave no alarm.

The outlaw took his captivity better than was to be expected, though he did a good deal of growling in a low tone.

For awhile the most sanguine members of the party expected to meet with immediate trouble, but, after the first hundred rods were passed, their prospects improved. Elbridge and his men certainly were in the rear.

Dark John revealed his border-craft in a striking way. He went from point to point almost like a shadow, and his work was thorough. Although several times seen by those who followed he did not pause to address them until they had made a decided advance. Then he fell back, spoke to Harv, and a halt was ordered. Even the latter did not know the cause until the rover returned.

He came back and joined the group.

"Caution now becomes necessary," he announced. "A party of Indians are camped in a small gulch, and we must pass along the cliff above them. Every possible sound must be avoided."

"I take it we can't pass no other way?" inquired Harv.

"We cannot. I have looked to see, but the way is too rough. Let every one keep tight rein."

He glanced at Ben Bragg.

"You will have chance to shout an alarm, but I advise you not to do it. You remember the warnings we gave you before we left the cave."

"I'm ter be shot ef I yell," explained Ben, cheerfully.

"Yes."

"I'm not yellin'!"

"Remember the warning, for it is no idle one."

"I'm deaf an' dumb," Ben asserted.

"Follow, and use all possible care."

Again he led the way, and the crisis soon came. The mounting light of the camp-fire was seen first; then they rode out on the verge of the cliff and the camp-fire was revealed below them.

It was a startling sight, even for the experienced bordermen. The fire was bright, and it plainly revealed a score of Indians. They were bedecked with war-paint in profusion, and armed as well as the fugitives, themselves. It was a fierce and dangerous-looking party, and it was not hard to understand how they were thirsting for human life.

The mounting fire shone upon the fugitives and added to their danger. Dim as the light was, keen Indian eyes would not fail to see them if directed toward the spot, and the rat-

ting of a horse's foot against a loose stone might precipitate the dreaded notice at any moment.

Ben Bragg, alone, eyed them longingly. It was aggravating to be so near allies, yet powerless to ask their help. He remained discreetly silent.

The fugitives lost no time, and, a few yards further on, the high rocks at their left grew low, enabling them to turn away from the edge of the cliff. All breathed freer, but Dark John suddenly checked their advance with an impious gesture.

Manchester listened and heard sounds which could be interpreted in but one of two ways: an animal or a human being was moving among the rocks, and, the hunter thought, toward where they stood.

For a moment Dark John hesitated; then he glided toward the suspected quarter like a shadow. Hailstorm Harv dismounted, extended himself at full length and pressed his head to the ground, but his rifle still could be seen in his grasp.

There was a rustle—a leap!

Was it man or beast?

For a moment unseen objects struggled, and then Harv leaped up agilely.

"All right! Stay here!" he directed, cautiously.

With long, light steps he followed where John had led. Five minutes later both returned.

"Toll is paid, an' we'll pass the gate!" quoth Harv.

"Another dead Injun!" growled Ben Bragg.

"Critter," retorted the guide, sharply, "I'll thank you ter keep yer mouth shut an' save me the trouble of cuttin' off yer ears. You ain't poopy, the Lord knows; but without yer ears you'd be a holy terror to buff'ler flies. Ef it'll do yer any good I'll say the dead Injun is alive, an' only tied up fer Christmas market. Turkeys goes off the hooks then, but *you* needn't worry; donkeys is safe."

Ben muttered some indistinct reply, and the advance was resumed.

Shortly after the ground descended rapidly, and they reached a stream which flowed over a rocky bed. The opportunity to hide their trail was so apparent that it was improved, and for the next half-mile the horses were made to walk in the water.

When this was no longer possible, on account of a series of falls, Harv found something to interest him and called the rover's attention to a peak at their left. From where they stood it looked almost like one huge pillar, so precipitous were the sides.

"I'll be shot ef I ain't seen that place afore!" the guide declared. "It was a good ten year ago, when I was but little more nor a kid, but it lingers in my mem'ry still. John, that's the Promised Land fer our moccasins ter tread."

The rover hesitated.

"Are you sure?"

"Go thar, an' I'll convince ye."

"I have faith in your judgment, and if you say it is a good place, go there we will, one and all. Hailstorm Harv seldom makes a mistake."

It was a compliment not to be expected from the morose Gypsy, and Harv did not fail to appreciate it.

"The road up is rugged, but as reg'lar as ef made by humans, which same I was told by an old hunter he reckoned it was. From hyer it looks all woods, but thar is dandy grazin' fer the hosses, ef no change has took place. Ez fer us, small game is, or was, plenty in the woods; pure water is thar; an' I don't know o' no better place ter fight, ef fight we must."

"Enough! Lead on!"

They went, and, once at the foot of what seemed to be the impregnable peak, found a path which wound around the side in a tortuous way, but which, followed, led them up the ascent so well that the horses were never at fault or under difficulty.

Once up it was found that the side was not so steep as it had looked, and all were pleased with the situation. They were a few hundred feet from the summit, and, as Harv pointed out, on a sort of shelf. The ground was level for some distance, and well calculated for a camp. On its southern side rose a sheer cliff two hundred feet high; on the north there was a similar descent.

Between these two cliffs the space was like one-half of a half-moon. At the east both cliffs, gently curving, met, and made, beyond, a sheer descent, from the extreme top, of four hundred feet. They had entered this severed crescent at the broad end, which was wide and agreeable to the eye.

Grass and trees abounded, making a pleasant camping-place, but what impressed them most of all was the fact that the place could be so well defended. At certain points, too, the upper cliff was of concave shape, so that a roof was formed.

Looking down from their perch the light of three fires could be seen, which marked the whereabouts of the enemy.

Little time was lost in seeking rest, and the confidence of the leaders was so great that no guard was stationed. There was need of none; the night passed uneventfully.

Harv, John and Walter were early astir, and

in accordance with a previously formed design, the trio went in search of game. Food must be had, and it was their plan to lay in a good stock at daybreak and then keep close to camp.

Less than half an hour had elapsed before they were back laden with game, and the prospects were encouraging. Breakfast was prepared, and all ate heartily—even Ben Bragg's appetite was good.

When this was done, Asher, who admired the grand scenery greatly, wandered toward the wider end of the crescent, to feast his eyes still further, but had been gone only a few moments when he returned with rapid steps and startled expression.

"Hullo! what's up?" Harv demanded.

"We are in the enemy's camp!"

"How's that?"

"There is a shanty over there, right in the crescent, and lawless-looking men are around it!"

The guide leaped up and stalked in the direction indicated. When he paused it was with a dumfounded air.

The shanty and the men were there, directly in their own fancied place of security; they had passed them unseen and unseeing; and, instead of being in a sure refuge, they were neighbors to outlaws, and in a trap from which there was no visible way of escape!

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE STRANGE LEADER OF THE GANG.

"WAL, I'll be decapitated!"

Hailstorm Harv uttered the words in astonishment and dismay. It would have been impossible to believe the strangers had been there all night were it not that they were just coming out of the shanty, and rubbing their sleepy eyes with the unmistakable manner of men out of their blankets.

No explanation was needed to tell what they were; they had the air of wild, free rovers, colored with plain signs of rascality.

Some of them strolled down toward the water fountain.

"Is it as bad as it seems?" Manchester asked.

"As bad! It's a hundred times worse!"

"They are our foes?"

"Sure!"

"Can't we pass them?"

"Do you see any way?"

"No."

"Me, too. Oh! say, will you take your rifle an' hit me a few cracks over the head? I'm in a nightmare; I must be; things ain't what they seem."

Harv made a serio-comic motion of tearing out his hair, to exhibit his grief, but soon came down to practical conduct.

"Who would hev thought o' seein' a shanty an' men hyer? Thar they be, all the same, an' the shanty is old enough so it's seen more nor one storm o' rain an' snow. Last night we walked inter a reg'lar outlaw village on a small scale. The trees hid the shanty an' the men was all asleep. We went past 'em as innocent as lambs ter slaughter. Hyer we be—what be we goin' ter do about it?"

"Is it possible for us to pass them unseen?"

"Thar is one chance in a dozen, narrer as the outlet is; but we should hev ter go without our hosses. They couldn't be took past."

"We must not desert them."

"No, sir; we should be lost babes without 'em an' never bring up nowhar."

"How about a dash for liberty?"

"Out o' the question. They could shoot every one us as we rode down the path, an' not half try at that."

"The amount of it is," interrupted Dark John, "we have strangely walked into a trap, and are fast in its jaws. Plan as we will, there is only one thing to do: we must remain quiet and trust to good luck to help us out."

There was not much encouragement in this decision. The fugitives were so close to the outlaws that any trifling circumstance might betray the former, while if an outlaw took a fancy to walk toward the narrow end of the crescent, it would be remarkable if he did not at once see the little party.

All of the latter retreated but Hailstorm Harv. He lay down in a thicket and watched the unwelcome neighbors with many a muttered execration upon them. He could not understand why they were there. If allies of the marauders it was to be expected they would be with the main body at this crisis. That men had made it a resort in the past was certain; that they should do so now was peculiar.

A fire had been started in the shanty, but most of the men lounged around, yawning and preserving ill-tempered silence, until a negro brought out their breakfast.

Then all fell to with zeal.

Harv studied the chances of passing them secretly, but without getting new confidence. Another night would doubtless afford a chance, but that discovery could be averted so long seemed out of the question! If they could pass by day! —if, but that meant a mountain just then.

The guide did not see how it was to be done.

Unwilling to let valuable time go to waste, he went back to his friends, sent Manchester to take

his place as a picket, and then called Dark John to join him in considering whether it was a possibility to descend the cliff by means of united lassoes.

Breakfast was over when Walter took his new place of duty. He ensconced himself in a thicket and lay watching the strangers.

"Veritable cut-throats!" he muttered. "Rufian and desperado is written on the face of each one, and grizzly bear on their persons—they are all muscle. Hard foes they would make in a struggle. The worst of Elbridge's and Talcott's gang I've seen can boast no superiority over these fellows in their chosen line of outlawry."

Two men came out of the shanty and walked toward the hunter. One leaned heavily upon the arm of his companion, and the pallor of his face and slowness of his movements indicated that he was suffering from some illness or injury. He was a tall, rather good-looking person, and must have been dashing of style at one time.

As they proceeded Manchester was seized with the painful belief that they were going at once to the point of the crescent, but the tall man suddenly spoke:

"Let me rest here!"

He indicated a tree near Walter's covert, and sat down with his back against the tree.

"Weak as ever!" he muttered, bitterly.

"You'll gain soon, cap'n."

"Idle encouragement! It might brace up a city weakling, but not me. Illness is a grim fact and health does not come at bidding. In the meanwhile, two-thirds of the band have gone with my lieutenants, and the few braves, white and red, who remain here because I am popular with them, fret, grow ugly, curse their ill-luck, and draw near the point when they will break away wholly, desert me, and go off on their own hook. Think of it!—Captain Tom Talcott, who was to be the central figure in the outbreak, bottled up here like a hurt buffalo, while his men are swarming along the line of the settlements!"

Manchester listened with breathless interest.

This disabled man was no inferior person; the renowned captain of the marauders was before him!

"A palsy on the hand that struck this blow!" Talcott went on, pressing his hand to his side. "It was confounded dark at the ford, but I believe it was that demon, Hailstorm Harv, who gave me the cut!"

Walter was getting interesting history.

"I like this peak," pursued the outlaw. "Here I've passed many a day in summer, when officers were on my trail; here I hatched the plan of the revolt; here I met the red chiefs and drew them into it. Now, however, the resort bids fair to grow disagreeable; I am like a wounded, run-down buffalo who wallows in dust and blood and can't reach the water he covets!"

There was a good deal of dramatic fervor, but no loud-voiced ranting about this swarthy captain, and the hunter realized that he was a spirit fit to lead where spirit, courage and absence of conscience were required.

Again his companion tried to comfort him, but was curtly interrupted.

"I am out of the raid, Ted."

"It may be all for the best, cap'n."

"Bah! You talk like a parson. Drop it!"

There was momentary silence, and then Talcott added:

"Speaking of parsons carries my mind back to the past."

"When you were a church-goer?"

A disdainful gesture was the only direct reply.

"You remember when I went East?"

"Yes."

"I had an experience, then, which was out of the ordinary course of events. I don't know what started me, but something impelled me to go back to the home of my childhood, which I had not seen since my eighteenth year. I wish I had not gone—yet, if matters had transpired differently, I never should have returned here."

"Why, I thought no power could keep you away from the wild, free prairies and mountains."

"We know little of power until we see the earthquake, the whirlwind, the lightning and—other great things."

"I hope there was no earthquake where you went in the East?"

"There was; an earthquake of the worst kind, as far as I was concerned. I left the name of Tom Talcott behind me, and appeared in my native place as they knew me when I was a boy. No one suspected what a life I had led in the West. I saw many of my old acquaintances; among them, a certain girl!"

"Ah!"

"Don't put on an air of wisdom, Ted; any one could guess it. She was a mere child when I left home; she had grown to be a young woman by the time I returned. I saw her and surrendered my heart at once. I, who thought myself a man of iron and impervious to the weakness of common men—I grew to worship this girl!"

Talcott paused and his eyes assumed a far-away look as if he were mentally gazing at the girl who had fascinated him.

"She was beautiful, intelligent and—well, cunning and deep as her sex always are, I think she eclipsed them in that respect. Justice compels me to admit that I don't think she was as unscrupulous as women usually are, however.

"I sought her company. She was polite to me, but I never could tell the state of her mind. Was my passion returned? That was the question I struggled with in vain. At last I seized the chance to ask her in plain words.

"She was coming from the woods with a quantity of autumn leaves, I remember, when I met her. I asked the eventful question plainly—would she be my wife?

"She listened with close attention. There was the absence of confusion, of pleasure, which I thought a woman like her would manifest on such an occasion. Looking back I can see that, besides the gravity of her face, there was evidence of deep thought, of scheming. Even then I saw something of it, and wondered if she was about to ask me the size of my bank-account; but, like weaker men, I dare say I was a little blinded.

"In reply, she said if I would meet her at the same place, that evening, I should have a definite answer. The hour and the place were enough to surprise me, but I accepted the verdict.

"We met according to agreement.

"You say you love me?" she questioned.

"I answered affirmatively.

"Are you willing to prove it?"

"Put me to any test whatever!" I responded, with the combined recklessness of a boy—which I was not; and a desperado—which I was.

"Then come with me!" she directed.

"I obeyed, and was led to the house of a Mr. Hunter, whom I knew to be her uncle. She handed me a chisel.

"Force open this window!" she directed, pointing.

"Ted, I was taken aback. I knew she was estranged from all her relatives in town, and that there had been a good deal of trouble—the exact cause I never knew—but this was a little strange. However, I was seized with the same spirit which causes me to do reckless deeds in this Western land; indeed, after a period of puerile goodness in the slow old town, I was rather glad to dip into crime; and I thought it a glorious chance to show how devoted I was.

"Blindly, unquestioningly, I took the chisel and forced the window open.

"Enter, go to the door, unlock it and give me a chance to enter!" she next directed.

"I obeyed like a humble dog.

"She then entered and, with the readiness of one acquainted with the premises, led the way to a large room on the ground floor. She produced a key and unlocked an old-fashioned 'secretary,' so called, which stood in the corner. Then, oblivious to me and all other things, began to go over certain papers within the secretary.

"I admired her nerve, but expected every moment that discovery would come. The house was occupied and people were sleeping there—but we were not discovered.

"I stood by the door—her faithful dog on guard—while she rummaged to her heart's content. I saw her thrust certain articles into her dress; what they were I cared not. Finally, she relocked the secretary and announced that she was ready to go. We went, securing the house after us, but taking no great pains to hide our trail.

"She led the way until near her boarding-house, and then said good-night and was turning away.

"But you haven't answered me!" I exclaimed.

"You have won the right to an answer; come to-morrow and you shall have it!"

"With this reply, and a laugh which I thought coquettish, she retreated to the house before I could stop her.

"I was a trifle dazed, but ascribing it to female crankiness and love of power—I had seen other women before then, Ted—I concluded I would not batter the door down at that hour of night. I went home, doubtful and ugly, but determined. The next day I went for my answer. I obtained it—in the shape of a note. It read thusly, my dear Ted:

"When you receive this I shall be many miles away; I am about to leave town forever. For what you have done for me I am grateful—more grateful than you will believe. Do not grieve over a woman who could so misuse you; a strong man should unite his strength with more of womanly conscience than I have shown. As a partial return for what you have done I'll state that a man is near who knows Captain Tom Talcott! A word to the wise is sufficient. Forget me, if you are wise; forgive me, if you can!"

"That was all, Ted, but it was a screamer! Jupiter! how I raved!

"Before I had time to make a fool of myself, two things happened. First, word went forth from the Hunter family that their house had been robbed of valuable papers and money. They suspected my charmer, and searched for her, but she had gone. Secondly, another wild man of the West showed up; an enemy of mine; and, with a due regard for my safety, and with

disappointed love pulling at my heart-strings, I packed my grip and hustled back to the bounding West. I've never seen any of the other parties to my story since, or heard of them."

"Who was the girl, cap'n?" Ted asked curiously.

"Her name was Mirabel Wayland!"

CHAPTER XXX.

THE HANGING SWORD OF DOOM.

THE careless reply gave Walter Manchester one of the greatest shocks of his recent career. He had listened attentively to Captain Talcott's story, not because he had any personal interest in it, but because Talcott was a man who commanded attention, and his light manner in the face of his illness was admirable.

The final revelation was startling.

Mirabel Wayland a thief?

The charge would not have shocked the hunter had he believed Roger Elbridge's charge against her, and thought her capable of attempted murder, but, in the charm of her presence, he had failed to believe—had almost forgotten the deputy-sheriff's accusation.

Now came this second story of crime, and, as the constant dropping of water wears the rocks away, so Walter was staggered by the accumulation of charges.

"Mirabel Wayland!" Talcott revealed. "A woman with a fair face and plausible manner, but evil enough to be a fit mate for one as bad as me! Yet, if she had said yes, and not shown the crooked side of her nature, I'd given up the prairies and mountains, the galloping steed and the ringing rifle, the trail of the buffalo and the death-growl of the grizzly—given up all for her sake, and turned into an Eastern milk sop! Bah! what fools these mortals be!"

Dropping his momentarily-earnest manner the outlaw laughed, and then drew his pipe, lighted it and began to smoke lazily.

"I feel a bit easier, but Tom Talcott is not himself, and won't be for many a day yet," he added.

Ted looked at his chief curiously.

"What would you do if you met this Mirabel Wayland again?"

"Do?" cried Talcott, with sudden fire. "Do? Why, I'd have her if Lucifer, himself, laid claim to her before me! I won her that night; she belongs to me! Do? Why, I'd make a sea of blood and then swim in it—Perdition! what nonsense I talk! I'm a fool. Ted, I wish we could start a still up here and make our own whisky. Put your wits to work and see if it can be done!"

It was a sudden "descent from the sublime to the ridiculous," but quite in keeping with Talcott's erratic nature. He blew out a wreath of smoke.

"Whisky or no whisky, this is good tobacco, Ted. It puts a man's mind at ease."

Walter Manchester's mind was not so easy. He was generous enough to stand by one who impressed him as being worthy of confidence, even in the face of odds; but when evidence accumulated too much against a comparative stranger, implicit confidence would be folly.

But this was not all. The declaration of the lawless, hot-blooded captain that he would do so much to secure Mirabel, if he saw her again, made their present perils stand out in more striking relief.

If Talcott learned that Mirabel was near, they would be like persons pursued by ravenous wolves.

Few men were naturally bolder than the young hunter, and, limited as had been his experience on the prairies, he had caught the impetuous spirit peculiar to that region. Now, he studied the situation and calculated the chances of success in case of a struggle with the outlaws.

Ten men besides Talcott were visible, but he felt sure they did not represent the entire band. The odds were three—perhaps four—to one against the fugitives, and by nature, zeal and training all of Talcott's followers were hard fighters.

"We cannot afford to invite a conflict," was his decision. "The policy of secrecy must be followed as long as possible."

Dark John came to relieve the hunter, who, with considerable difficulty, retreated from his post of observation undetected, after first warning John by a gesture. A few words then notified the rover of the imminence of danger, and then Walter went on to join his other friends.

As he approached he noticed a little by-play which was significant. Doctor Allenton and Asher, chancing to be moving at the same time, met among the trees. Allenton half-paused, as if he would speak, but the handsome boy, with an air of careless unconsciousness, passed by with a trivial remark and frustrated any design toward conversation.

The doctor looked after him with an expression which alarmed Manchester.

"The truth is working in his mind!" thought the hunter. "If he has not grasped the whole deception, he suspects it!"

Hailstorm Harv approached.

"The lassons ain't long enough to reach down the cliff," he announced, "an' we couldn't go that way, nohow. I dunno as we want ter. I say, stick ter the bosses, come what will. Mightyation! we'd be lost with nothin' but our own legs ter depend on. Mine snap an' twangle like a jew's-harp jest ter think on't."

"Who do you suppose leads the enemy?"

"Not Elbridge?"

"Talcott, himself!"

The guide whistled.

"Say, we be in for it. Did he say anything of interest?"

Walter did not see fit to tell all Talcott had said.

"He is wounded and unable to be on the trail; hence, he is fuming like a caged lion. He suspects that his wound, which he received in a night-fight at some river-ford, was given him by one Hailstorm Harv."

"When you see him ag'in, tell him 'No thanks!'—he's welcome to it."

"Harv, we are not to get out of here without fighting."

"I believe it."

"The enemy are at least three to our one."

"Jest enough fer fightin'."

"In trust of trouble, let us not forget we have non-combatants here. Hagar—"

"Is equal to a man, b'mighty! Look at her! Arms of iron, heart of oak, pluck of a tigress. A good shot, too, somebody has tol' me."

"But Asher—"

"Is a weaklin'."

"The one of all others we should protect."

"You're uncommon 'arnest, Walt, but you skeerously touch me in the heart. A puny boy I don't like an' can't!"

"Asher is as Providence made him."

"So is Ben Bragg, but I don't like the critter."

"You do yourself injustice, Harv. You and I are men, and the true man is always chivalrous to the weak—"

"Say no more, Walt! Nobody ever accused me o' bein' back'ard in a crisis, an' I won't turn out o' my old path. Yes, yes, I dar' say we oughter look out fer Asher in a pinch, an' I'll back you up ef you'll back him!"

Asher had not failed to observe the glances cast toward him, and he now approached. There was just a trace of embarrassment in his manner, but he carried his rifle in a jaunty way, and his manner was resolute.

"What are the chances of a fight?" he asked, in an off-hand way.

"Dunno," Harv answered; "do you want one?"

"Of course we are not going to act a timid part."

"Should say not."

"We carry several rifles, and ought to be able to hold our own if the odds are not too great."

Harv smiled grimly and, seizing an opportunity when the boy was not looking at him, winked to Walter. The idea of Asher appearing as a warrior seemed both amusing and absurd to the stalwart guide, but he was too good-natured to wound the youth's feelings.

He soon walked away, and left Walter and Asher together. The former noticed with pleasure that the latter did not shrink from him as from Doctor Allenton, and, after a little thought, determined to try an experiment.

"I've had a good view of the enemy, Asher."

"Desperate wretches, aren't they?"

"Yes, and, what is more, Captain Tom Talcott is with them!"

Asher started and flushed, and a troubled expression settled upon his face. Except for the change of color the emotion he betrayed was no more than was to be expected from any one when told that the redoubtable outlaw was near. Manchester was disappointed, but he remembered that talk of Captain Tom Talcott had been common during the last few days. Even if Asher was Mirabel he had been given ample time to become accustomed to the name of the white chief, and to the knowledge that the man was near.

"This makes our situation more serious," finally observed Asher.

"How so?"

"With Talcott in command, the outlaws will be without an iota of mercy."

"Did you ever see this Talcott?" the hunter asked, with careless air and a pretense of yawning sleepily.

The dark skinned youth looked only at the ground, but was as calm as ever.

"Many men have come to our camp, first and last, men who, as a rule, were utter strangers. None of them ever gave the name of Talcott, so, I dare say, he was not among them."

The evasion, if such it was, was skillful.

"Would you like to take a look at him?"

"No," returned Asher, hastily; then, evidently realizing that he had made too much of the question, he more quietly answered: "We are liable to see too much of him and his followers, later, and idle curiosity might lead to discovery."

"Should trouble come," pursued the hunter, more earnestly, "I hope you will keep near me. I shall be glad to fight for you in an emergency."

"I hope you don't regard me as a child, sir," returned Asher, with an increase of color.

"You are younger than I. Don't object to help from a friend."

"Object? Most certainly not, sir. I know the kindness of your heart, and feel glad that I have such a friend near me. I trust that I fully appreciate the motives of those who are helpful to others, and helpful simply because they do not rate themselves above all else in the world."

Hailstorm Harv returned with long steps.

"The pot is b'ilin' like mad!" he declared.

"What now?"

"Roger Elbridge is with Talcott!"

"What! have we been trailed here?"

"Possible, but not probable. Elbridge is too matter-of-fact for one who knows he has driven his enemies into a trap. I reckon he has only come ter confer with Cap'n Tom; mebbe, ter ask fer more men."

Manchester did not answer.

"Be that as it may," Harv pursued, "it makes our situation more serious. The sword o' doom is hangin' over our heads, an' a musketeer's bill will cut the string. We're hemmed in, an' Roger is rappin' at the portals of our prison."

Asher shivered. Clearly the boy had a horror of Elbridge, and to be so near him, and yet unable to flee, was painful in the extreme. Danger had never been more imminent, and they were powerless to meet it.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE DEPUTY-SHERIFF REAPPEARS.

HAILSTORM HARV proceeded to rearrange his party to suit his own ideas. He said nothing, but was of the opinion that the collision would soon occur. The men of the band were fretting on account of the inactivity, and would not be likely to sit down at the door of the hut and rest in indolent unconcern.

If one wandered toward the point of the crescent, he would be blind if he failed to make discoveries.

The fugitives' horses had eaten their fill of fresh grass, and Harv and Walter tied them as far back as was possible. Then the guide planned where each and every person should seek position in case of an exchange of bullets, taking advantage of the trees. Rocks there were none, but one fallen tree would be valuable in an emergency.

"Wish we could throw up a breastwork," the guide remarked, "but it's out o' the question. We must take it as 'tis."

"You'll take it in the thick o' yer head," growled Ben Bragg, arousing from a long period of surly silence. "Them fellers know how ter shoot, an' they'll blow you inter glory as soon as they squint along the bar'l o' their shooters. You ain't nowhar!"

"Hello! who asked you ter speak, old Corruption Lazy-bones Sneak-wolf? You'll get yer ears cut off afore yer kin hum your evenin' verses, ef you don't mind yer shape an' fitter yer tongue."

"I'll talk when I feel like it, an' don't yer forgit the fack, Mister Too-good Hypocrite Scare-death Face!"

Manchester smiled at Ben's laborious attempt to imitate the many-jointed name Harv had applied to him, but the guide saw no fun in it.

"Mebbe you want me ter tickle yer nose with the butt o' my rifle?" he retorted.

"Do it! I've run my head ag'in' everything else, an' I'd like cause fer another bandage on my cranium!"

Ben's lone eye glared aggressively upon Harv.

"Walt," remarked the guide, "I reckon we'd better gag this overgrown varmint, so he can't yell an' give the alarm."

"All right."

"Say, let up!" Ben groaned. "Ain't I behaved decent afore? Seen any signs that I's goin' back on yer? I'm no fool, ef I be in bad comp'ny jest now; let me lone, an' I'll behave like a lamb!"

"All right, One-eye, but hear this: Ef you sound your bazoo ter our hurt, I'll throw ye over the cliff; I will, by thunder!"

"It's a bargain, Harvey, old chap!"

The guide looked at the glib speaker suspiciously, but, having no visible evidence that Mr. Bragg meditated mischief, finally turned away. When he did so, Ben at once began to work his hands in an effort to get them free.

"Once let me squirm out o' these strings," he muttered, darkly, "an' I'll hev satisfaction fer all I've gone through."

Dark John fell back and joined the group with more signs of perturbation than Manchester ever before had seen on his grim face.

"Elbridge and Talcott are walking this way!" he announced. "Secrete yourselves, and don't be seen!"

There was no need of repeating the order. Each of the party disappeared, and profound silence reigned. The two men whom John had named, appeared, walking slowly, with Roger supporting Captain Tom. The former was doing most of the talking, and showed signs of annoyance, as if the outlaw had not fully acquiesced in some plan or request.

Neither was in an observing mood, and a visible adversary might have passed unseen, but, slowly and steadily, they drew near the point of the crescent.

Hailstorm Harv touched the Gypsy's arm.

"It's got ter come!" he whispered.

Dark John did not answer.

"Let's try ter nab them on the quiet. They can't stan' up ag'in' us no time at all."

"It's well," the rover briefly answered.

Nearer came the walkers; so near that every one gave up hope of escaping discovery.

"I shall have to refuse you," Talcott was heard to say. "You have fifteen of my men, red and white, now, and it would be folly to detach more. What you have are undoubtedly fretting because they must search in the holes among the rocks for fugitives they must not slay, while their allies are riding rough-shod along the border."

"I'll turn over every one of the party but the girl," persisted Elbridge, "and your rough riders can do as they wish. If the red-skins covet scalps and thirst for the torture-stake, what better chance can they have?"

Captain Tom paused within three feet of the tree which sheltered Manchester.

"All very well from your point of view, but the boys object. That's the case in a nut-shell."

"I will pay them—"

"Even if they accepted, I have no more men I could give you without cutting down my own body-guard, so called. That I can't do; they thirst to be riding for booty, and only stick by me because I am Tom Talcott. It's pure devotion, you see; but if I sent them off, you couldn't hold them twelve hours."

"But I must find the girl—"

"Confound the girl!" cried Talcott, impatiently. "I don't care a picayune for her. Let her alone, Elbridge, if you want to live your days out."

"If I have a hobby, and am willing to pay for it, what of it?" demanded the deputy-sheriff, stiffly.

"It will bring you misfortune; that's all. Besides, you don't know where the girl is. She escaped you several months ago; this spring, according to report, a beautiful girl has been seen riding madly over the prairies, and you rush to the conclusion it must be she; and you are chasing this Dark John under the idea that he knows where your *inamorata* is. Moonshine! Elbridge? moonshine! Even if you find her, no good will come of it. For her sake you have deserted your post as deputy-sheriff and become an associate of outlaws. I tell you, when the Evil One wants to catch a man he makes love the net, and gets a woman to act as insnafer. Love? Bah! Women? The wise man lets them alone!"

Elbridge was not convinced by this cynical outbreak.

"Opinions differ," he answered.

"True, and that's what makes the spice of life. But let us return to the shanty. My strength fails, and I shall have to lie down and rest."

They turned away and walked slowly back, much to the relief of most of the secreted persons, but, when they had expressed their gratitude for what they regarded as good luck, Hailstorm Harv added:

"Ef I'd had my wits early enough, they wouldn't have gone back."

"No?"

"No! Gents, the chance was offered us to gobble Tom Talcott, an' we oughter hev done it. Do you s'pose they would tackle us ef their leader was our prisoner, an' we give them ter understand that the first man to fall would be him? No! There we missed it; we should 'a' took the cap'n while we had the chance."

"It would have been a bold scheme," Allenton doubtfully returned.

"Bold schemes usually work."

The guide's idea created a profound impression, and all gradually grew to hold his opinion. If discovery could be averted they did not want Talcott, but discovery seemed certain.

It was too late to carry out the plan, and Talcott and Elbridge soon disappeared among the trees. Hailstorm Harv went forward as a sentinel, and soon saw the deputy-sheriff ride away. He went without any new recruits, and, evidently, not in good humor.

Anxious waiting continued, and the fugitives were not in good humor. The impassable cliffs which hemmed them in were like enemies, too obdurate to be moved to pity; too strong to be susceptible to attack or strategy. Again and again the veterans of the party studied the situation, trying to find some ingenious plan by which they could escape, but in vain.

Thus the remainder of the forenoon passed; thus the afternoon wore on.

Much to the surprise of all, the outlaws did not wander to the point of the crescent, and twilight found the situation unchanged.

Their spirits rose.

"To-morrer won't find us hyer!" Harv declared.

Dark John nodded approvingly.

"We'll pass the inemy durin' the night," Harv pursued; "unseen ef we kin; with war an' pilage ef we must!"

There was no one to oppose the undertaking.

The crescent had become a place hateful to the sight, and all longed to get away. Doctor Allenton spoke complainingly of the necessity of such frequent changes of base, but to Harv and John, who had been on the frontier so long, it was nothing. With them a nightly shifting of camp was no uncommon occurrence.

The outlaws prepared and ate their evening meal, after which all retired to the shanty. Hailstorm Harv crept forward to get view of them, and found all but Talcott engaged in playing poker. The captain was in the second room, and abed.

"The sky brightens!" announced the guide, on his return. "All day we've said we couldn't see how we was to avoid discovery; now, I can't see why we *should* be discovered. What should send 'em sneakin' this way, now?"

"We have hope of escape."

"You bet! We are goin' ter pass the foe as soon as they go ter bed. Ef seen, we'll give 'em a rough dance; we are all fightin' men but the non-combatants"—he glanced at Asher and Hagar—"an' they needn't borer no trouble. Cheer up! I an' my guard o' braves will see you safe through the pinch."

"Take care," retorted Hagar, "that I don't have to help *you*, to send you along safely!"

Manchester and Allenton laughed at the quick answer, and the spirits of all grew higher. Harv and John looked to the horses and made ready for the fresh start. The shanty was properly watched, and it was known just when the outlaws went to their blankets.

No guard was posted, and, happy over their past good luck, the fugitives awaited the proper hour for trying to pass Talcott's quarters.

CHAPTER XXXII.

ASHER'S DANGEROUS COMPANY.

"We shall hev ter leave Ben Bragg, or appropriate another hoss!"

All was ready for the start. Saddles and bridles were in place, and it only remained to mount and leave the crescent. It was Hailstorm Harv who spoke, and Ben Bragg quickly returned:

"Gents, I ain't a hog, an' don't ask you ter put yerselves out fer me. Leave me!"

"Where we go," declared Dark John, "this ruffian goes. He is not a safe man to leave behind. He would contrive some way to give speedy warning."

"Correct! I'll get a hoss at once, an' give the poor beast 'honest comp'ny, ef not an honest rider."

Harv hastened away and soon accomplished his purpose. All mounted save Harv and Dark John. The latter watched by the shanty; the rover led the party on their dangerous way. It was a time of keen suspense. All the outlaws were supposed to be asleep, but a messenger might appear, to see Talcott, and discover them at the most inopportune moment.

Step by step they went. Now they were near the shanty; anon, abreast of it; presently, they drew away and were on the side where lay the road of escape.

Dark John preceded them down the peak, but Harv did not appear until the foot was reached. Once there, and reunited, every heart beat freer except Ben Bragg's. He groaned audibly, and considered himself a child of misfortune. The leaders had already decided which way they should go, though the next stopping-place was in doubt; neither John nor Harv knew the country well enough to be aware of its promising recesses.

All rode away. The vicinity was so rough that they had to start along the same route by which they had come to the peak, but this they intended to abandon after going a hundred rods.

They were moving at moderate speed, and using due care, when, suddenly, other horsemen appeared in front of them, as if cast up from the maw of darkness and the rocks, and the two parties were almost face to face before they saw each other.

"By the fiends!" cried a loud voice, "we have them, at last. There's the Gypsy bag!—at them, boys!"

"Roger Elbridge!" muttered Hailstorm Harv.

There was neither time nor opportunity to avoid the collision. Elbridge's men cast themselves upon the fugitives, and, though Dark John struck down the first two who presented themselves, the force of numbers drove the smaller party back a few yards by mere weight.

Asher was at the rear, and his eyes dilated with terror. He saw John, Harv and Walter at the front, battling bravely and with effect, but the rocks seemed alive with Elbridge's followers. Blow followed blow, and the outlaws yelled in true Western style until it appeared to the boy that he was among madmen.

Heroic as was the defense, its upholders could not keep the foe away from the rear. Asher saw Hagar level a revolver and fire at close quarters, and the boy tried to follow her example and use the little rifle he carried, but his arms were as if palsied.

One of the assailants forced his way near Asher and, with a tremendous howl, swung his

clubbed rifle for a blow. It descended, but not upon Asher. The wielder of the rifle was pressed to one side by the surging of the crowd, and the blow fell upon the head of Asher's horse.

That animal staggered, gave signs of distress, and then, violently releasing himself from the pack, bolted to one side in a spasm of pain and terror.

Almost before Asher realized it he was clear of the combatants, and his horse was rushing along at a mad gallop.

For a moment this gave him pleasure, but the fact that such flight would soon take him away from all friends, and into the mountain wilds, led the boy to tighten the rein and try to check the animal. In vain—it was running without reason, and heeded not the touch of the bit.

The experiment was not repeated. Asher was too much alarmed, and too much bewildered, to object seriously to this flight. Having such a horror of Elbridge and his followers, nothing else seemed at that moment to be so bad as to fall into his hands.

The boy had dropped his rifle, but a revolver and a knife remained. He would not be wholly helpless.

The horse galloped on with loose rein until the rider's calmness began to return, and, realizing that he would soon be a lone waif in a hostile country, he suddenly pulled on the loose rein, again to try and check his flight, but, as he did so, the horse stumbled and fell.

Much to his own surprise Asher alighted on his feet. Then he turned to the horse, but that animal lay perfectly still. Asher tried to induce it to rise, but in vain. The idea that it had fallen dead proved incorrect, for it still breathed, but words of persuasion and authority alike failed to produce an effort on its part.

Alarmed at the idea of losing this last, though dumb, friend, the boy was still persisting when a sound at one side caused him to turn suddenly.

Two men stood near him.

"Wah! wah!" exclaimed a rough, coarse voice. "I reckon we've made some kind of a find."

"A child, isn't it?" questioned the second man.

"Et's a boy, an'— Shoot me, ef it ain't Dark John's kid!"

Asher recognized Ceph Peters and Jonas Chapin, and again turned to flee. The movement was in vain; Ceph sprung forward agilely, and his muscular hand closed over the boy's arm.

"Ho! ho!" shouted the ruffian, "I reckon this is a dandy haul! Say, old man, I'll pocket some o' them dollars you an' Elbridge offered up!"

"Not so fast," Chapin protested. "Who is this boy, do you say?"

"The same who played Elbridge fer a flat, an' went ter Dark John's camp as a nigger; an', wot's more, the same kid who hez been a-follerin' John for camp-luck fer some time past."

"Zounds! this is great good luck!" the old lawyer agreed, rubbing his hands.

"I was the first ter see the kid; I claim the reward!" declared Ceph, stoutly.

"You shall have it."

"The little snipe is tremblin' in my grip like a run-down antelope. Say, you spindle-boned young rooster, whar is Dark John? No lyin', now, or I'll hang yer up by yer toes!"

"Cease such ridiculous language, Ceph! Let me talk with the boy."

"All right; but don't furgit I want some more boodle. He's got ter tell whar the black-bided rover is, or out goes his candle. You hear? Yah-whoop!"

Ceph roared in the prisoner's ears, taking the delight of a low ruffian in the fear he manifestly was causing. Asher had not spoken from the beginning, and, after one vain struggle in that tenacious hold, had stood perfectly still.

Jonas Chapin modulated his voice to a soft and persuasive pitch.

"Young man, we wish to find Dark John, and recognize you as a member of his party. If you will lead us to him you shall receive no ill-treatment. I promise this faithfully."

"I don't think you would be kindly received by him," Asher answered, with unexpected directness.

"Oh! as to that, we shall, of course, take enough men so he will be obliged to use us properly."

Asher was silent.

"Where is the rover?"

"You will have to go elsewhere for your information."

"Surely, you don't refuse to tell?"

"I do!"

"Think again! There is war between us and Dark John's party, and you are our prisoner. Surely, you do not wish us to treat you harshly?"

"Surely, I am not going to turn traitor," returned Asher, in a clear voice.

"We can compel you to speak."

There was no answer.

"And," added the lawyer, more sternly, "we shall show no pity if you refuse to act sensibly."

"I have nothing to tell!"

"Durn it, why do ye monkey with the little snake?" demanded Ceph. "Can't you see he has got all the stubborn ways peculiar ter the Gypsy tribe? Jest set yer heel on his neck, right away, an' crush him! Let me take charge, an' I'll hev the truth out o' him in two seconds, or— Yah-whoop!"

The ruffian suddenly thrust his face forward close to Asher's, and indulged in a yell which sounded more brute-like than human. The boy started nervously, but made no cry or complaint.

"Let me manage here!" authoritatively directed the lawyer. "The boy is going to tell, even if we have to hand him over to the Indians, to be dealt with at the stake of torture—"

"Wot's the diffikilti with our doin' that same stake act, ourselves?"

"Be silent, Ceph! Boy, you see how you are situated. We are honest, well-meaning, kind-hearted men, but, being servants of the law, we have to follow the rules laid down by law. We must—we *will* find Dark John; and you must aid us. Do this promptly and without idle talk, and we will liberate you at once—when John is found. Refuse, and we will draw the secret out of you by means of torture!"

There could be no mistake in regard to Chapin's position. It was not his nature to be boisterous like Ceph, but he was just as much in earnest, just as merciless and dangerous.

Despite this, Asher did not waver. He declined to lead the way to Dark John, or to give any information concerning him, and his firmness was greater than was to be expected.

Ceph was for pressing matters to an extreme point at once, but Chapin was more patient and wily.

"We will give him a little time to think it over," the old lawyer announced. "Peters, gather wood and start a fire. By its blaze we will talk and meditate, but unless our prisoner yields before morning, we will then hand him over to the Indians!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE STRUGGLE BY THE CAMP-FIRE.

GRUMBLING his dissatisfaction in tones he took no pains to render subdued, Ceph collected material and made the fire by a towering rock not far away. Dry fuel was abundant, a strong wind having, at some past time, cut down a line of timber which stood on the ridge at that point. The outlaw heaped on the wood until a bright blaze was mounting upward.

One feature of the spot chosen for the camp was that Asher, being placed on the north side, was in a recess, and could not escape without running past the men.

On being guided to the recess he had retreated to its furthermost limit, but this did not suit Chapin.

"Come nearer the blaze!" the lawyer directed.

"I am well enough here," Asher returned.

"Your face is in the shadow, and I want to see what you look like."

"I am not on exhibition like a museum freak."

"Have your own way, Young Contrary; it is not to be expected that any one who long keeps Dark John's company would be anything but a mule in disposition. I am told you are in some way related to him?"

"Yes."

"Your straight black hair and dark face tell of Gypsy blood. How long have you been with John?"

"Always!"

"Ah! is that possible? You were not with him at Cottonwood Blaze, last year."

"I never go to the settlements—don't like them."

"But you are always with him in the mountains and on the prairie?"

"Yes."

"He had a young woman with him last fall. Did you see her?"

"Yes," indifferently replied Asher.

"I want to find her, and am willing to pay handsomely for it. Now, you are poor, and money is a treasure in more ways than one. You would be a great man on the border, if you had the cash I am willing to give for the information mentioned. Do you want the money? Will you tell where the young woman is?"

"Possibly I can direct you to her grave."

"Her grave?"

"Yes."

"Do you mean that she's dead?"

"Yes. Dark John took her to a settlement west of here—I think it was True Blue—and she died there. Fever, or something of that sort."

Asher spoke carelessly, but was at once pierced through, in a figurative sense, by Chapin's sharp regard.

"I don't believe it!" he declared. "Somebody has lied to you."

"I saw her die myself," boldly asserted the handsome boy. "It was a warm fall day, pleasant and agreeable, and her life went out when the sun went down. She ceased to be, and I saw the great change. I was not present when her remains were consigned to the earth,"

but should say it would be easy to find the grave by inquiry at True Blue."

The lawyer was perplexed and uncertain for awhile, for Asher's manner was quiet, apparently frank and convincing, but he soon recovered his positive manner.

"I don't believe it!" he asserted. "You are in the plot to throw us off the track, but it won't work; Mirabel Wayland is alive! Why," added Jonas, watching Asher closely to see what effect the words would have, "she was riding about the prairie this very spring, rigged out in semi-Indian style, jaunty as a ballet-dancer."

"I've heard of that rider, but know no more of her," Asher responded, quietly.

"I am going to know more of her!"

"Why are you so interested in this case?" demanded the handsome boy, turning questioner.

"Mirabel Wayland is a criminal; I am a lawyer."

"Do lawyers usually take to the wildest parts of the West to hunt criminals?"

"That isn't the question. Will you, or will you not, lead us to where Dark John is?"

"I will not!"

This clear, emphatic response set Ceph Peters to roaring like an angry buffalo bull, but Jonas accepted it more philosophically.

"I'll break your Gypsy spirit, or kill you!" he declared, implacably. "I'll leave you to think it over. If, at any time, you decide to comply with my wishes, mention it and your condition will change vastly. I know how to reward those who help me, and you shall have money in abundance. Consider this carefully. Take poverty and trouble with Dark John, and weigh it with ease, comfort, glory, cash and many a jolly time—if you join me. Think it over!"

Chapin turned away and went to the other side of the fire.

All this while Asher had kept his face in shadow, and one who knew him well would have been surprised to notice how much deeper and more masculine than usual his voice was when conversing with the lawyer.

Now he was left alone the boy began to look earnestly, but secretly, at Chapin and Peters. He had been deprived of his revolver when captured, but the knife had escaped notice. He considered his chances if he made an effort to escape, but the muscular form and numerous weapons of Ceph Peters intimidated and set him to trembling.

He was of curious nature, as far as courage went, this reputed son of the Gypsies. Now his spirit would flash out with all the boldness of a veteran plainsman; anon, he would shrink, tremble and grow pale like a girl.

Had danger, trouble, and life's vicissitudes made him what he was?

Ceph had taken the boy's blanket from the fallen horse, and in this the youth wrapped himself closely, but did not lie down.

Time passed. Chapin fell into broken slumber, but his outlaw ally sat upright, smoked, meditated, and occasionally cast evil glances at the silent figure in the recess. Ceph's fingers itched for gold, and, believing that vigorous measures would compel Asher to show the way to Dark John's supposed hiding-place, at once, he resented the temporizing methods of the lawyer which were deferring, and might blast his hopes of winning further reward.

He longed to lay his brutal hands upon the delicate prisoner and carry his point.

This regard troubled Asher, and he shrank further back into the recess and pretended to sleep. Chapin had not been conscious for some time. Asher, accustomed to reading the heavens, knew that the hour was well past midnight. He wished Ceph would relax his vigilance, but that person sat grim, surly and ominous in the path of escape.

Asher saw a tremor of the dark background, as if a section of the night had receded before the breath of the wind. It moved; it hesitated; it sunk lower; it rose; it advanced.

The handsome boy held his breath. The moving shadow had resolved itself into the shape of a man. There was a burly figure, and a coarse, brutal face, half-concealed by bandages which twice crossed it, and left only one eye visible.

The prowler was Ben Bragg!

Nearer he came, his movements so wonderfully stealthy that no sound betrayed his advance. The solitary eye blazed with fierce and eager emotions, and his locomotion on hand and knee was like the creeping of a panther on its coveted prey.

Asher was bewildered. Why did the outlaw thus approach his allies?

Chapin slept on, and Ceph did not raise his gaze from the fire.

Ben Bragg paused, hesitated, and looked alternately at the other men. Once, he turned his gaze to the left, as if seeking for a chance to approach Ceph, which he could not do without arousing Jonas. No other way of advance was open, and he crept on toward the lawyer.

Then he partially raised his bulky figure; one hand, in which Asher could see a stone, was uplifted; the hand fell, and Jonas dropped from a sitting position to the ground.

The blow was enough to alarm Ceph. He leaped to his feet, but not quicker than Ben Bragg. The two, who had been friends for so

many years, confronted each other for an instant, and then Ben flew at his fellow rough in a fury, raining heavy blows upon him.

Taken wholly by surprise, and amazed at being attacked by his best friend, Ceph was staggering before he fully realized the situation. When he did he fought stoutly, but the furious assault to which he was subjected rapidly weakened his powers of resistance.

Asher looked on in silent horror. If flight had been possible the boy would not have been witness to the scene, but they blocked the entrance to the recess.

At last Ceph went down, stunned by a heavy blow, and Ben turned toward Asher. The latter's courage all died out, for instinct told him he had been the worst loser of all by what had occurred. Ben grasped the boy's wrist.

"Come!" he ordered, dragging his captive out of the recess.

Asher struggled and protested, but in vain; the outlaw's strength was not more overwhelming than his heart was hard; and, without another word, he compelled the prisoner to walk, or, more correctly, dragged him on until they were many rods from the camp-fire.

At last even Ben Bragg's strength failed, and he paused on the top of an elevation, where he could detect any hostile approach before danger was too imminent. Asher stood panting and trembling.

"I've found yer!" Ben uttered, in deep, discordant accents of triumph. "I'd been workin' on my bonds all day, an' I squirmed out on 'em minus most o' the hide on my hands an' wrists, when the fight took place near the peak. Yas, I got away; an' sence then I've follered yer, follered yer on. My eyes ain't cat's-eyes, an' I can't foller no trail in pitch dark, but I knowed the direction you took, fer I seen you go; an' I follered, follered. I reckon 'twas instinct led me; that an' the fire, but one thing is sartain—I follered yer, an' I've found yer!"

Ben Bragg's mind was not an open book to the captive, but there was so much of fierce joy in his manner that Asher was speechless with fear.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

BEN BRAGG.

THE outlaw chuckled and continued:

"I've been in bad luck o' late, but things hev changed; I'm on top now, an' thar I mean ter stay."

"I hope," observed Asher, faintly, "that you have taken me from those other men in order to return me to Dark John and my other friends."

"Return ye?" echoed Ben, in surprise. "Give ye up? Not much!"

"They will reward you well—"

"No, they won't; they won't git the chance."

"But I have never injured you—"

"No; nor me you. Injure you? Bless your soul, no!—not I! Et ain't in me ter do sech a thing; that was why I took ye away from Ceph an' the lawyer—I mean, 'cause you was among enemies. But you are with a friend, now; a right warm friend, gal!"

"Girl!" faltered Asher.

"So I said, my pretty."

"Your words are strange."

"Not a bit, they ain't; they're plain words. Don't think you kin blind me ez you did the others. The boy Asher exists only in fancy; that is, you are Asher, but Asher is a gal!"

"You speak absurdly—"

"Now, don't! I know you like a book, Mirabel Wayland, an' hev done so for some time past. Don't deny it, fer 'twon't be no use; an' don't tremble so, like a leaf in a gale. I tell ye, you're with yer best friend. I all'ays admired ye, an' would 'a' been glad ter acted in yer favor at Cottonwood Blaze. My heart was warm toward ye, but all the rest was ag'in' me; Elbridge and Chapin hated ye, an' Ceph Peters thought only o' gold. Ben Bragg is made o' diff'rent stuff. All winter yer poowy face danced afore my eyes, an' I s'pect I dreamt about yer more nor fifty times; I really s'pect I did."

The outlaw lowered his voice, and seemed profoundly impressed with such a phenomenon.

"If you will take me to my friends you shall be richly paid," tremulously promised the prisoner.

"No, gal; no!"

"Why do you call me that? I am Dark John's son."

"You are Mirabel, an' nobody else. Can't I see? Wal, I ruther reckon! Let you go? Gal, when I turned ag'in' Chapin an' Ceph I made them my foes, as John, Harv and' the rest was afore. Do you think I did that fer fine sentiment? I did it 'cause I loved ye, gal, an' I was fightin' fer a wife!"

"Providence protect me!"

"From what? From whom? Ain't I as good a man as any in these parts? Ain't I a dead shot? Kin any one beat me with rifle or lasso? Who goes me one better on the hard muskle, or skill in usin' it? Gal, one as poowy as you don't want ter tie up ter no narror-chested city swell, but to one who has brains an' sand. That's me; that's Ben Bragg; an' he's every inch a man!"

The speaker drew himself up proudly, and his muscular form gave him a certain impressive air. It would have been a picture of a degree

of dignity had not Ben's bandaged face offset it so absurdly, but of these things the prisoner did not think.

Fear of the lawless captor overcame all else.

"You don't know what you say," Asher faltered.

"I know you are Mirabel, an' that you're goin' ter keep the fire bright in my hut arter this. Don't look ter the past, gal, but to the future. Ef I've done anything wrong in days gone by, the time is past. I'll be squar' in the future. I'll hunt an' trap, an' do no lawless deed. More nor that, I'll protect you from Elbridge. Yes; let him dare ter come nigh, an' he'll find my rifle loaded!"

"Even if I were Mirabel, it would be well to win my consent before you plan for the future."

"I'll ask it humbly, but, ter be frank, I won't take 'No!' But you won't answer that way; I am so useful ter you that you won't throw me over. Set down, my wild rose, an' hear me talk!"

Alarmed as he was, Asher was too weary to refuse the invitation. Escape was out of the question at that moment, and it was as well to recruit all possible strength for future emergencies. For future emergencies! What did that mean to the captive?—what did it *not* mean? To one at the mercy of Ben Bragg it meant everything.

The outlaw remained standing, leaning upon the rifle he had caught up before leaving camp. It had been Ceph Peters's, and Ben had listened to its ringing voice many a time in the days when he and Ceph had been partners, but this did not trouble him now. He had cut loose from everything in order to gratify the new feeling that surged in his riotous mind.

He looked at his present companion with curiosity.

"Gal, you ain'tafeerd o' me, be you?"

"Afraid?"

"Yes. You act that way."

"You compelled me to come here roughly, but I don't want to think you would injure me."

"That's whar you're right. I don't intend it. I wouldn't hurt ye; I couldn't!—not ef yer did as I said. The ones who are your enemies is Elbridge an' Chapin. Oh! they think they hev kept their secret sence I've been scoutin' with them, but Ben Bragg's ears is sharp; I'm on ter them. An' they talk er'bout the law! Scream'ing' painters! they don't keer no more fer law nor I do fer a wounded wolf."

"I believe that."

"Yes, I've listened ter them; I know what is urgin' them on in this case. When you first got ter Liberty, an' went ter live with old Horace Granger, Elbridge come ter see you. He had knowned you in the past, 'fore even he come West, an' he 'lows his appearance skeered you.

"He axed you ter receive him ez a warm frien', an' while you hesitated, he sort o' laughed an' says: 'I hev the latest news o' you from yer own home!'

"Cordin' ter him that skeered you clean out o' yer wits, though why it should I don't know. That's your secret, an' I won't press the woman I love ter tell tales on herself; but I know you left the East under a cloud, skipped lively fer the West, an' was in hidin', as 'twere, when at Liberty.

"You foller me, I take et.

"Elbridge says you didn't dare send him adrift, so you allowed him ter be yer friend, but sort o' kept him at a distance when he talkeded matrimony ter you. You did right b' mighty!"

"Still Elbridge was 'way gone on you, an' he got deeper in the caldron o' love ev'ry day. He was jealous o' Doc Allenton fer awhile, but you shipped the doctor—good job, too!—an' Roger thought he had yer.

"Now, Jones Chapin likewise lived in Liberty. He had been an Eastern lawyer, but never won a case fair in his life, as I heerd him confess ter Roger. What he did do was by crooked turns, an' the East got so hot fer him that he anteloped.

"You foller me, eh?

"Some o' the folks East knewed whar Chapin was, an' when you got inter your trouble, gal, they wrote ter Jonas—little suspectin' you was in the same town with him—an' offered him good pay ter go on a rovin' commission ter find you; for they b'lieved you was in the West.

"Jonas entered their service an' drew their pay, never stirrin' out o' his office fer them, but mailin' his letters from hyer, thar an' yender give the idee he was hustlin' right smart their service.

"Why was this? I'll tell you. Jonas an' Roger was friends, as high-toned rascals are likely to be; an' when the lawyer first got his order he says to Elbridge; 'I am goin' ter arrest Miss Wayland an' send her back East!' Says Elbridge: 'Not much you won't; I'm goin' ter marry her. No arrest, Jonas!'

"So they put their heads together an' laid the scheme. Jonas was to make b'lieve he was hustlin' fer his employers, an' git all the cash out o' them he could; then, when Roger was married ter you, he was ter give Jonas a share o' the money he would git by makin' you Mrs. Elbridge.

"All went swimmin'ly fer awhile, but th-

Eastern parties got suspicion o' Chapin, an' he got the grand bounce. Then it became one thing or nothin' with him; by playin' false ter his clients he had lost a good thing, an' his only hope o' fillin' his pocket with cash was by havin' Roger an' you marry.

"You know better than me jest how Roger asked fer your hand in marriage an' you anted up a great, big 'No!' but I hev told yer in plain words jest what I hev heerd them two men say with their own lips.

"Both may be trottin' the *law* on their knees like a baby ez a business: but in this war against you they've been guided only by the most selfish an' villainous motives, b' mighty!

"I more nor half b'lieve that so much thinkin' on the subjick has made both sort o' crazy. T'otherwise, would they give up business, comfort, an' all else, ter foller you fer so long? I say not. They was on your trail three months last fall, an' two months this spring.

"You foller me, don't yer?

"Put it down as a fack that both are crazy on that one idee! But that don't alter t'other fack that they hev hounded you sore, an' behaved like scoundrels. Tell yer what, I got so that my blood b'iled over our conduct. Them who will persecute a female gal ain't fit ter breathe, especially ef she's barn'some!

"Now, gal, you see how 'tis. I've been yer friend all along; my heart bled fer ye, b' mighty! an' bled bad; I's ashamed o' the comp'ny I's in, but I stuck to it, thinkin' when we did find yer, I'd save yer.

"That's what I've done, an' I'm glad on't. One so sweet an' pooty oughtn't ter be persecuted—not by a condemn'd sight! Ef you's forty year old, an' lanky, an' scrawny, an' bony as a skeleton, it wouldn't be so bad; fer you wouldn't mind bein' misused. But a gal so young, an' plump, an' pooty! Never, never! No, by Beelzsbub!"

Ben had told his story very well, for, while he stuck to facts, and simply related what he had overheard from Elbridge and Chapin, there was nothing to trouble the least gifted of orators, but he grew erratic toward the close.

He wished to impress his companion deeply; to make his own alleged virtues stand out in bold relief; to win deep gratitude and the reputation of having a big, honest heart, and when he tried to be eloquent he floundered painfully.

Never having advanced honorable and lofty sentiments before, he was not prepared for it now, and sentiments and words alike came with difficulty. It was like drawing water from a dry well.

Asher had listened without interruption. There had been a good deal of interesting history in Ben's statement, and the malice and meanness of Elbridge and Chapin, which had led them so long to fill the role of persecutors, lost nothing by being presented through such a medium.

Bragg, if not sincere, was picturesque in his forcible denunciations.

"I am glad you have such honorable ideas," Ben's companion answered.

"So be I," returned Mr. Bragg, naively.

"You shall be well rewarded when you take me back to Dark John."

"Take you back!" quoth Ben, frowning.

"Yes."

"Didn't I say you couldn't go back?"

"But, surely, with your ideas of honor—"

"Say, do you s'pose I'm honorable jest out o' wishy-washy sentiment?" cried Benjamin, in an injured tone. "No; I'm honorable fer my own sake, an' ef I can't gain nothin' cut on't, I'll be hanged ef I'll be honorable!"

"But—"

"Now, stop! I've planned, fought, thowed up friends an' employment fer you, an' I'm goin' ter hev my reward. I love the ground you walk on, gal; you are goin' ter marry me—peaceable, ef you will; by force, ef you compel me ter show who's boss hyer!"

"But your honor—"

"Honor be durned! Et's Ben Bragg I am lookin' out fer, an' don't yer furgit it!"

"Reflect! If you persist in your case, my friends—Dark John, Hailstorm Harv, and the rest—will soon be on your track. They will follow where you go; their pursuit will be tireless, they will overtake you; they will show you no mercy!"

"I ask none!" retorted the outlaw, extending his brawny arm. "I'll match 'em in cunnin' an' with weepions, an' I don't go under until graves are as thick as mile-stones on the trail I've left behind me. I've got you, gal, and I'll keep you! You are mine, mine! Take you away from me! The man dies who tries it!"

Mirabel—Asher no longer—gazed at the vehement speaker in speechless dismay. It was useless to deny her identity; useless to attempt escape. She was Ben Bragg's captive, and that meant a vast deal. He frightened her beyond expression. Even in the semi-darkness she could see enough of his brutal face and lone eye to terrify her.

In his way—the way of an unrestrained animal—he loved her. He had her fast, too, and, unless help came, would persist in his purpose. With war between her friends and Elbridge's party he would have a favorable chance to take

her away; to compel her to keep his company wherever he saw fit to travel.

He laid his hand on her arm.

"Come, gal!" he directed, authoritatively. "We must be many miles away before day dawns!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

STRANGE NEWS BY THE CAMP-FIRE.

THE fight near the peak was over, and Dark John and his friends, panting, bruised and wounded, had the satisfaction of a certain kind of triumph. They had fought the outlaws to a stand-still, giving them such punishment that they had remained in idleness while John and his associates beat an orderly retreat.

"It might 'a' been better," admitted Hailstorm Harv, "fer I'd have liked to wipe 'em out wholly, but we need not be hogs. Le's shake on it!"

"But where is Asher?" demanded Manchester. "Asher?"

Harv repeated the name mechanically, and, with the others, looked around for the handsome boy. He was not visible.

"He is captured!" Walter exclaimed.

"I don't think it!"

"Why not?"

"I remember, now, seein' his hoss make a halt with him. They went this way, too."

"Search!" ordered Hagar, briefly. "We are not children, nor blind. We must not sit down here in idleness, but look for the boy."

"I'm with you!" declared Harv.

"We all are," Walter agreed.

"Ben Bragg is gone also," observed Allenton.

"'Twas ter be expected," the guide answered.

"He had a chance ter escape; he seized it."

"We lose time," remonstrated Walter. "Let the search begin at once. Where are we to expect discoveries?"

"The hoss was runnin' like one in a panic—skeered, or, more likely, wounded. Ef 'twas the latter, it may hev gone over a good bit o' ground."

"Asher must be found at once!" declared Hagar, showing far more feeling than usual.

Dark John had been silent, but he now proved that he had been better occupied than any one else.

"You remember the rocks, two miles east, which we noticed yesterday, and which, we fancied, bore resemblance to a human head?" he inquired.

All remembered the rocks.

"Let that be our rendezvous. For the present we search for Asher, and do it by spreading out like a fan. Let us cover all the ground we can, and be thorough. If the boy be found, let the finder sound the cry of the night-bird which I taught you in the cave, and this cry, passed along from one to another of us, shall summon all to where Asher is. If he be not found, keep on until we meet at the rocks of the human head. In any case, found or not found, though we go in peace or in trouble, as the case may be, let us meet at the rocks."

There was but little to be added to this, and they started according to the plan, Hagar taking equal rank and responsibility with the men.

That she was capable of doing it Manchester did not doubt; the grim old woman had fought the outlaws as bravely as any one, and, the hunter suspected, that one of their own party who had done the least execution was not Hagar.

With eager haste the young man urged his horse on, which did not mean that he went rapidly. The rough and rocky way would not admit of it, and the animal's feet often trod where it was obliged to use both care and strength to go at all.

Manchester never relaxed his vigilance or neglected any duty. The theory of a runaway horse might be correct, and might cover the whole ground, but his fears went further. He pictured the missing member of the party as a prisoner among lawless men, white or red, and his apprehensions always were active.

He did not think of that missing one as Asher; the "son" of John and Hagar had ceased to be a feature of the case. He was a dream of the past; an illusion dispelled by conviction that, practically, he had been a myth.

Mirabel! That was the name, the form, the living image that was in his mind. It was for her, not for any boy, he searched, and the fears that beset him were of the keenest kind. Where was she? What perils beset her?

Never had progress seemed so slow. He toiled up-hill and down, his horse often slipping, and often recoiling at the brink of a chasm; he searched the darkest recesses, and listened for some sound of other men. He listened, too, for the bird-call which would certify that Mirabel was found, but the cry did not come.

His faith in Dark John's plan wavered more than once, but he had the instincts of a soldier and obeyed all directions to the letter.

Finally, he saw something which at once interested him; the dull light of a fire became visible in advance. Hope rose, and he hastened forward until within a few rods of the blaze. There he dismounted and continued on foot, looking keenly to every adjacent point, and with rifle ready for use.

His first impression was that the place was

deserted, but, as he drew still nearer, he saw a solitary figure crouched near the decaying pile. It was that of a man, but his head was bent forward until he looked like a hoop, and his body had a motion as if he were in a rocking-chair.

Considerably puzzled, the hunter stood inactive for awhile, but further progress brought a discovery; the doubled-up figure was that of Jonas Chapin.

Walter only waited to satisfy himself that the old lawyer was alone, and then hastened forward and grasped him by the arm.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

Jonas neither started nor answered, nor did he look up or take notice of the hunter. He continued to mutter in broken tones and indistinct words.

"Rouse up!" Walter ordered.

The lawyer gave no heed.

"What's the matter with you?" continued the young man, giving Jonas a shaking, but with no better success than before.

Taking a brand from the fire Manchester swung it about until he increased the blaze, and then thrust it quite near Chapin's face. The flash of the light produced an effect not possible to words—the old man raised his head and looked at the hunter, but his face was a revelation.

The face was blank; his eyes did not show the light of reason.

"An idiot!" Manchester muttered.

The meaningless stare was still fixed on his face, and, hoping to rouse coherency, he redoubled his efforts.

"Useless!" he finally muttered. "Misfortune has come to the old man in some way, and I will lose no more time with him; every moment is precious."

He called to his horse, which came obediently, and was about to mount when a whinny sounded at one side and a second horse, which the hunter had not seen before, struggled to its feet and came close to its equine companion.

Walter's face lost color.

The horse was Asher's, and the big white blaze in its forehead was stained with blood!

The animal did not seem to be severely injured, and he came close to the other horse and evinced signs of pleasure at the meeting, but Manchester leaped to the ground and went again to Chapin's side. The presence of the blood-marked horse so near the old lawyer was startling.

From his pocket he took a flask of whisky, and proceeded to pour a liberal quantity down Jonas's throat, following it up with an equally liberal outward sprinkling of water from a fountain near at hand.

This treatment revived Jonas greatly, and a second good-sized drink of whisky set his stagnant blood to flowing and gradually brought the light of reason to his face in a measure.

"You here," he muttered, staring at Walter.

"Yes."

"Where is Ceph?"

"Peters! I don't know. Do you see this horse?"

"Yes."

"Whose is it?"

"I don't know."

"Don't lie to me! It was lying down by this camp—"

"It must be the Gypsy boy's."

"Where is the Gypsy boy?" Walter quickly demanded.

A wave of intelligence and suspicion came over the old lawyer.

"I know nothing about him."

"This is his horse. He was here—"

"Yes, yes!" interrupted Chapin, in shrill complaint, beginning to rock himself forward and back again; "he was here! Ceph and I had him, and were keeping him prisoner, but Ben Bragg crept up on our camp and struck me senseless to the earth. The blow was here—here—and it will be the death of me. I feel it; I know it! Oh! the traitor, he has done me to death!"

"But Asher?" impatiently cried the hunter.

Jonas kept up his rocking, and, having been started into a pathetic mood by his own last words, whimpered and wept like a child as he continued:

"When I was out of the way Ben attacked Ceph like a tiger, and confused him with several heavy blows before Ceph could realize that murderer was in the heart of one to whom he had been a true friend; so the traitor succeeded in knocking Ceph senseless, too. When we recovered—"

"But the boy? Where is Asher?"

"When we recovered, both the boy and Ben were gone. I was not able to pursue, but Ceph was in an awful rage. In language most violent he swore he would find Ben and have revenge, and he went off to do it."

"Where did he go?"

"To search for Ben and the boy. We didn't know which way they went, but Ceph will find them; Ceph will do it!"

Chapin's voice had grown vindictive and exultant, but, as Manchester stood meditating on this new calamity—for a worse companion than Ben Bragg it would be hard to find—and wondering what his best course of procedure was, Jonas suddenly began to whimper afresh.

"I shall never see it; never, never! Oh! I wish now I had lived a different life, and that I had repented long ago; but my last years have been the most evil of my life. How can I hope for forgiveness for persecuting Mirabel Wayland so?"

"How, indeed?" muttered the hunter, looking at the miserable wretch from whom life was plainly ebbing as the light of full reason had gone already.

"It was a foul deed!" lamented Jonas, dismal. "We accused her of poisoning Horace Granger, when it was ourselves who did the crime."

Manchester started.

"You, poisoned him?"

"Yes. He was always against Elbridge, and upheld Mirabel in refusing to marry him; and we saw that our schemes to get money would not work while Granger was alive. Besides, he was getting his affairs in shape, we feared, so that he could cast off the veil of secrecy and return to his old life. It was all or nothing with Elbridge or me; we hoped we could manage Mirabel if Granger was out of the way. We gave him the poison—Elbridge and I!"

"But Granger, himself, accused Mirabel."

"The poison did not work properly. He did not die, but it made him crazy; he was crazy when he accused her. It was a foul deed; a most foul deed!"

Jonas wept on and lamented, but not with remorse. Had he been the cold, crafty man of old, no immorality of fate could have made him confess, but his tottering intellect made him wander on without understanding whom he was addressing.

"And Mirabel was innocent!" muttered Walter, absently.

"Innocent in all ways. We—we were the guilty wretches; the vile criminals."

"Despicable scoundrel!" pronounced the hunter, looking with loathing upon the rocking figure.

"That's it; that's it; no words can be too severe!" moaned the lawyer, lugubriously.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE OUTLAW'S SHOT.

MANCHESTER realized that a confession so important ought to be heard by other ears than his, and set out to take Chapin with him. The old man did not object, but the plan was not carried out. As soon as Jonas was on his feet he staggered and sunk unconscious into Walter's arm.

The hunter was in a dilemma. He did not like to abandon his plan, but the latest developments confirmed his first impression that Jonas was severely injured. Certainly, he seemed in a condition too precarious to be moved, and must be left by the camp-fire.

Should he stay with the injured man? He would run the risk of occasioning his own allies serious trouble by failing to meet them at the rendezvous, and—

Another thought decided him at once.

Jonas had said that Mirabel, alias Asher, had been taken away by Ben Bragg. Recollection of this fact returned with redoubled force, and the hunter felt that he could not remain in idleness while the boy-girl was in such great danger.

Turning abruptly from the insensible man he remounted and rode away. Asher's horse followed like a dog, evidently determined not to be deprived of companionship.

Walter longed for daylight; for clew to the direction taken by Ben Bragg. The area was wide, and there was no telling what course the outlaw would take. By day it would be possible for Dark John or Hailstorm Harv to trail him, though worse ground for trailing it would be hard to find.

The hunter rode on, but no longer expected to discover Asher near at hand. After assaulting Chapin and Ceph, Ben would be prudent enough to get out of reach without delay. Where, in the wild expanse of wild country before him, was the outlaw? Where was Asher?

Asher? No longer did Manchester think of Dark John's protege by that name. Mirabel! He whispered the word, and it grew dearer than ever to him. Before this night he had staked evidence of innocence, as revealed in her own manner, against Roger Elbridge's accusation, and had believed in her, in spite of all.

Now, he had Chapin's confession, and, disregarding the lawyer's mental condition, he believed it fully; and his faith, interest and devotion to the girl increased apace.

Devotion did not serve to discover her on the way to the rocks of the human head; he neared that point without encountering any human being.

Once in the vicinity, he found that the particular rock which bore the suggestive shape was on an elevation, and he was riding through a gulch and looking for a way up, when a small stone rattled down from the cliff and fell in front of him."

He looked up quickly.

Two persons were standing at the cliff's edge.

One of the figures was broad and muscular; the other slight. The pale light of the heavens

fell upon them, not distinctly, but with sufficient power to send a thrill through the hunter.

They were Mirabel and Ben Bragg!

He felt sure of it where others might have doubted, and a fever leaped through his veins. Mirabel was within sight, yet separated from him by an impassable wall of rock.

What could be done? He ran his gaze southward, but the cliff extended as far as he could see. If he hastened to reach its limit, he might have a long distance to ride, and even if the distance proved but short, captive and captor might have vanished when he had reached the top of the cliff.

But could he not use his rifle?

His hand sought the weapon, but, at the very moment he moved, the man above him suddenly flashed his own rifle into position. Manchester saw the weapon bearing down upon him and essayed to press so closely against the rock that the several protuberances which scarred its face would prevent a shot; but he was yet to learn what Ben Bragg could do with a rifle.

The weapon seemed not to become stationary before it flashed out its leaden messenger, and Manchester's hat fell forward over his eyes. Whether it was the work of the bullet, or of his own nervous start, he could not tell, but, later, the track of the missile was found through the hat.

When the hunter looked up again, no one was to be seen on the cliff.

Rapidly he rode down the gulch. If there was a way up the cliff it was further on, and gain the summit he must in some way. Every moment was of vital importance, for every moment Ben Bragg was hastening away.

Not until he had gone several rods was there any change. Then the sheer cliff became sloping, and he leaped from his horse and set about scaling it.

The task was not easy: it was possible only to hardened muscles; and his hands were cut and bleeding before, at last, almost breathless from his violent exertions, he drew himself up to the level.

He could not pause to rest, but locating the spot where he had seen Ben and Mirabel, he hastened back.

As he had expected, no one was there.

Picking out what he thought the most reasonable way of retreat he was about to start when, suddenly, he remembered the rover's directions as to the bird-call. Pausing, he sounded it twice and then waited for an answer, but no note came on the air.

Instead, some one emerged from the rocks near at hand, and he recognized Hagar.

"Mirabel!" he cried. "Where is she?"

"Mirabel?" Hagar repeated.

"Woman, will you bandy words now?" indignantly demanded the hunter. "I know Asher is Mirabel—"

"I denied it not," the swarthy woman calmly replied. "I only repeated the name because there was meaning in your tone. What of Mirabel?"

"She is Ben Bragg's captive!"

"How know you that?"

"I saw her; saw her here, on this very spot. Ben took a shot at me, but missed. I had to get up the cliff, and he has made off. Have you seen nothing?"

"Nothing!"

Hagar looked around with the eye of a veteran.

"This would be the path of retreat," she added. "I know not where the rest of our party are, but you and I are sufficient to run down the knave. Come!"

Dropping her rifle across her left arm the woman set out with long steps. Her skirts were not long enough to impede her movements, and Manchester soon found she was no mean companion on the trail.

With united judgment the pursuers had selected a shallow gulch which led off toward the east, and this they followed for several hundred feet, but without making discoveries. Then it terminated and, beyond, a large area was seen which was nearly level, although far from smooth.

"Separate here," ordered Hagar, in her straightforward way. "You keep to the right; I'll go the other way."

"If you find Bragg, call to me at once—"

The Gypsy held forward her rifle.

"If I call to him, it will be with this!"

Uttering these words in her coolest manner, but with a barely visible under-current of determination, the woman in another moment was receding with steps longer than ever.

Hard of face and voice, and masculine of form, she would have put many a man to shame in matters where courage and sagacity were concerned.

Manchester's confidence was not great—it was lamentably small. He realized that Ben had a wide area in which to hide, while they were but two searchers. Once more he sounded the bird-call, but there was no response.

The presence of Dark John and Hailstorm Harv, then, would have been more valuable than gold or diamonds, but they were not at hand.

The hunter hurried from point to point, scan-

ning every elevation in the hope of seeing human figures outlined against the sky, but seeing nothing, hearing nothing.

Presently the darkness grew less pronounced, and the gray light of morning crept phantom-like to the hills. The stars paled and disappeared; the gray mantle grew grayer; the east was tinged with red; the morning came.

Manchester stood in a canyon. There was a broad avenue in front where he could see for many rods, but cliffs hemmed him in on both sides. The scene was like, and yet unlike, that where he had been shot at by Ben Bragg, and the cliff not only as unscalable, but higher.

The hunter hesitated whether to advance or go back. He was far from camp, and might be equally remote from Mirabel and her captor. Would it not be best to discontinue the hazardous search, return to the veterans of the party, and start them on the trail?

Some influence caused him to look again to the top of the cliff. There he saw something which riveted his attention.

Along the edge of the sheer rock a man was advancing, not in the usual way, but on his hands and knees, creeping onward slowly, cautiously. Although the hunter was distinctly visible the creeper saw him not; all of his attention seemed centered on one object, whatever that was.

Inch by inch he crawled, never turning his gaze from a fixed point.

What was his purpose? Walter looked in vain to see; to him, nothing was visible, though he doubted not that the smaller rocks just ahead of the creeper held some practical attraction.

The man reached one of these rocks and partially raised himself until his head and shoulders were more plainly visible below. The sight gave Manchester a start. He recognized the burly body, the broad shoulders, the slovenly dress, the shaggy hair and beard, and the brutal face.

It was Ceph Peters!

The hunter's hand trembled as it held his rifle. He had been told that Ceph was tracking Ben Bragg and "Asher," and now the outlaw was creeping on some prey, it seemed.

Ceph stood erect but only for a moment. Then he sprung forward like a panther. He disappeared from view.

Manchester was victim to excitement, dismay and anger; for the second time that night a cliff kept him away from what he would most like to see.

Where was Ceph? What was being done on the cliff?

Suddenly two men appeared close to the edge of the rocks, struggling like maddened beasts. It was Ceph and Ben Bragg clasping each other in a death-grapple.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE PANTHER CROUCHES FOR THE LEAP.

AT the rocks of the human head Hailstorm Harv, Dark John and Doctor Allenton were standing in a group.

"Singular where Walt an' Hagar are," observed the guide, uneasily.

"I fear that rifle-shot meant mischief," replied Allen. "You know it was near here, and they may have arrived ahead of us, found enemies and got into trouble."

"It's possible. What's your opine, John?"

"Hagar can care for herself," the rover answered, with calm confidence.

"But she may hav been took by surprise."

"She is less liable to that than you or I."

"I'm glad you feel so safe, but I don't. Anyhow, we kin do no more now; our bird-calls meet with no response, an' we can't see no trail in the dark. Pity we didn't get hyer sooner. As 'tis, instead o' bevin' Asher back with us, we've lost two more members."

"Manchester is wise for one who has been but two years on the prairie," remarked Dark John, "and I think he will yet appear in safety. Hagar is all right!"

There was no such thing as arguing against this blind confidence, and Harv tried it no longer. They searched the new refuge and found it all that could be expected, chosen by chance though it was. There was no cave, but the pillar-like rocks made numerous recesses favorable for hiding, while, in case of a fight, they could hold the position against a force much larger than their own. They located their horses to their satisfaction and sat down to await the coming of day.

In an hour it was fully light.

Hailstorm and John went to the highest point to make a survey of the surrounding country, from which much was expected. Perhaps nothing would be seen, but there was a possibility that Walter and Hagar were in sight, while they were almost sure to see some sign of the enemy, they thought.

Reaching the desired spot they crouched on the rocky ground to escape observation and then scanned the approach.

Presently Dark John touched his companion's arm and pointed in silence. The other looked. Well away and below lay a gulch, and through this horsemen were coming slowly but steadily. In front of the squad walked a single person whose gaze was always on the ground.

"They're trailin' us!" Hailstorm exclaimed.

"That means red-hot work, John."

"Let them come!" Dark John returned. "It will prove an unlucky trail if they find us!"

"Watch that human bloodhound spying out our trail!"

"I could stop his trailing forever. Shall I do it?" And John half-raised his rifle.

"Stop, fer yer life!" commanded Hailstorm, catching the rover's arm.

Dark John smiled sardonically.

"Be at ease; I have no notion of firing. Still, we shall have to fight, just the same, if we stay here. They have doubtless been lucky enough to strike the tracks left by some one of us, and, probably, will be skillful enough to hold to the trail. Do we stay right here and fight them?"

"As well here as anywhere."

"So say I; it is decided."

"I'm troubled about Walt an' Hagar."

"They may come before the fight begins."

"An' Asher?"

The rover showed signs of genuine uneasiness.

"I do not know what to do about Asher," he admitted. "I should favor the plan of my leaving you, going back to the peak and trying to find the boy's trail there, but yonder men are now in the way, and we must not now divide. Again, I have some hope that the prolonged absence of Hagar and Manchester means that they are on a promising clew."

Doctor Allenton hastily approached.

"Talcott is below!" he announced.

"With the trailers?"

"I know nothing of any trailers, but he is at the north end of the cliff."

"Ha!" cried Hailstorm, "is the enemy so close? How many of them, Doc?"

"Nobody is with Talcott. He's sitting on a rock, alone. A dozen men are close at hand, though, looking for signs. It is the party from the crescent."

"Talcott alone?" cried the guide. "Ef I ev my way he won't be alone long. John, you remember 'my old scheme of ketchin' the outlaw cap'n an' holdin' him as a shield ag'in' his men? Ef the chance has come, what do you say?"

"I say, do it!"

Dark John spoke with unusual decision, and the trio hurried down the hill.

Talcott was found as Allenton had left him. His tremendous will had enabled him to endure the journey to that point, but, thoroughly wearied out, he was now glad to rest while his men searched. The plan of capture was quickly formed. John covered the captain with his rifle, while Hailstorm crept up on him.

If the redoubtable outlaw had been a well man the trick would not have succeeded so well, but, buried in gloomy thought, he was not the alert borderman of old. His first warning came in the shape of a voice behind his back:

"Look this way, Cap'n Tom!"

Talcott looked. There stood Harv, revolver in hand, the muzzle of the weapon bearing upon his enemy.

"You are my pris'ner," the guide proceeded. "We want you alive, but ef you say the word, the world won't be the worse off ef you make me shoot you!"

The captain faced the situation with singular composure. There was a sparkle in his eyes, a dilation of his nostrils, a hardening of his mouth which told of unshaken firmness, but he kept his seat.

"What do you want?" he demanded

"Your surrender."

"To whom?"

"Me an' my guard o' braves."

"What if I refuse?"

"Then this revolver drops a man who is a curse ter the wild West!" Harv replied.

"I take it you mean business, and you certainly have the drop on me. If I were a well man I would resist, though I died on the spot, but I can't fight now, and my men are at a distance. I yield! What next?"

"You will march around that point o' land an' toddle up ter the higher ground."

Talcott arose. Once on his feet he looked steadily at his captor, measuring the man with his eye. Despite his own enfeebled condition, and despite the alert riflemen above, whom he had already seen, he was tempted to join issues with the stalwart guide. Abandoning the idea, he reascended the acclivity with the easy, devil-may-care air common to him. Reaching the top, he looked first at John and then back to Harv, and observed:

"Gentlemen, this is an interesting meeting, and the 'drop' you've got on me is as big as Niagara. Improve your chance; if you don't cut my throat now, I shall do the job for you some day!"

"Thomas, you talk in a sanguinary way," coolly answered Harv, "but, with you, we know a dove's heart beats under the bristlin' plumage of an eagle. The whole West rings with the fame o' Cap'n Tom Talcott, an' his gentleness, honor, pity an' piety form the theme o' sermons, poems an' children's lullabies."

"Harv," quoth the outlaw, gracefully, "you deserve to win; I am not in it with such a magnificent liar. Do with me as you will!"

He turned partially away and had no more to say.

He was placed in the most favorable position, and then, leaving him to Dark John and Allenton, Harv went again to the lookout. He saw the trailing-party nearer yet, and realized that a crisis was approaching. All efforts to discover Manchester and Hagar proved futile.

The guide was by no means pleased with the situation. If their party had been united he would have been confident. Five or six riflemen could hold the elevation against a large force in open fight, and the presence of Talcott was worth a hundred men. But Harv was worried for Manchester, Hagar and Asher, and would have left the spot at once but for the rover's confidence.

There were good trailers in the enemy's ranks, and the force was soon at the base of the elevation.

The horses' tracks led up, and the pursuers continued to follow. It was time to check them, and Hailstorm Harv sprung to the top of a boulder where he would be in plain sight of all.

"Halt!" he shouted. They paused; they looked up.

"Stay right whar ye be, or you're dead men!" the guide added, cocking his rifle.

"Thar's one o' them!" shouted a pursuer.

"Yes," Harv retorted, "an' hyer's more nor one, as you'll find ter your cost ef you keep on. This land is private property. Keep off, or you'll get hurt! What do you want?"

"We want you an' all your gang, Hailstorm Harv!"

"You can't hev us!"

"You'd better load up that rusty old blunderbuss you hev in your hands, fer we are goin' ter charge, ef you don't surrender right off, quick. What do you say?"

"I'll show you."

Harv made a backward gesture, and Dark John led the outlaw leader into view of his followers.

"Look!" the guide added. "I suppose you all know the feller we've got tied up hyer, so snug? Ef you don't, I'll say his cards bear the melodious name o' Cap'n Tom Talcott. Your cap'n is our pris'ner; he's our safeguard. Listen, men! If you tackle us you seal Talcott's fate. The first man ter fall will be him—ef you make the attack we will shoot him!"

The words produced profound effect below. Hailstorm Harv was known by reputation to every one of the outlaws. His valor, prowess and resolution had been camp-fire words for years. They knew he would do as he threatened, and the fact that, by an attack, they would seal Talcott's fate checked the most impetuous of the band.

Zeal gave place to dismay.

But the voice of Talcott, himself, suddenly rung out in clear and commanding accents:

"Men, heed not the howling of a wolf. I am still your captain, and I command you to act at once. Though it be to death, charge, my heroes; charge!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE RIFLE-SHOT ON THE CLIFF.

NEVER before had Manchester seen a struggle so furious as that between Ben Bragg and Ceph Peters, and it was all the more impressive because they had so long been friends. Their present ferocity was in sharp contrast with the olden harmony.

The fight seemed very equal. Each was a veritable gladiator. Years of border life had hardened their muscles, and both were skillful wrestlers.

Once, Walter raised his rifle, tempted to shoot, but he knew not with whom to sympathize, and could not have picked his man when the target was wanted, so rapid were their evolutions.

The scene was fascinating, but it could not continue forever. One moment they seemed on terms as even as ever; then the watcher saw Ben swing his opponent around, hold him poised for an instant, and then cast him over the face of the cliff.

Walter involuntarily uttered a cry as he saw the bulky body descending to almost certain death.

In the crevices of the cliff occasionally grew a gnarled and twisted dwarf-tree, and, half-way down, Ceph struck upon one of these. It gave way under his weight, but his fall was checked. A little below he caught at a point of rock and held for a moment, but that, too, failed him, and he fell to the earth with a heavy shock.

Ben Bragg, standing on the summit, uttered a triumphant cry, waved his hand, turned and disappeared.

The spell upon Manchester was broken, but it was impulse which led him to hasten to Ceph's side. The outlaw was stirring, and trying to rise, but without success. He saw the hunter, and a faint gleam appeared in his dully-staring eyes.

"Whisky!" he gasped.

Walter's flask remained in his pocket, and he gave it to the fallen borderman, who drank long and eagerly.

"It'll revive me an' artom," he whispered,

"but I'm a dead man!"

"It may not be so bad as that."

"But it is. I'm hurt in'ardly—I feel it, an' I

tell yer the chain o' life is snapped asunder. I'm done fer, an' twas Ben Bragg who done it. Oh! the traitor! the scoundrel! ef I could git a shot at him he should go under yet!"

A fit of coughing interrupted his speech, but after ejecting blood-streamed mucus his fury broke forth in words more sweeping than those which had gone before.

"Asher!" exclaimed the hunter. "Where is he?"

Ceph half-started from the ground.

"Go up!—go up!" he ordered, in hoarse accents, but with great eagerness. "Ben has the boy—ef boy Asher is—an' you can baffle the traitor, yet. Go, but don't take Ben as I did. Use yer rifle!—use it without marcy! Go on! I'll foller!—yes; I'll foller whar Ben goes, ef I drag my maimed body like a snake fer miles. Go, go!"

Walter needed no urging. He would have gone before Ceph's wild words ceased, but his most critical, anxious gaze failed to discern any point where it was possible to ascend. There was only one thing to do, and he did it; he ran forward at full speed along the cliff's gnarled base. It was only a matter of time when he would find a scalable point.

He found it much sooner than he expected.

Behind a swelling part of the rocky wall he found a cleft, with an inner slope which less practiced feet than his could have gone over easily.

With a thrill of hope he began the ascent, leaping from point to point, and never being at loss for a foothold.

He had almost gained the top when a single rifle-shot broke upon his hearing with startling clearness—so near that he fancied the rocks trembled under his feet with the concussion. It was an alarming occurrence—had Ben Bragg, desperate and full of malice, shot the captive he could not retain?

The hunter reached the top; no one was visible. He sprung forward, but had gone only a few steps when a scene burst upon his vision which brought him to a stop.

Before him lay Ben Bragg, prostrate, silent; near at hand, Mirabel, her face buried in her hands, was weeping almost convulsively; while over the fallen outlaw, erect, stern, defiant, and as impressive as some heroic being of old carved by a master-sculptor's hand, stood Hagar, the Gypsy.

No explanation of the scene was needed, and the angular, dark-faced old woman looked like a Madonna to Walter then. Mirabel was saved!

The hunter advanced nearer the group, but spoke not a word. Speech would have been weak at that moment. Mirabel rose and threw herself in Hagar's arms. The Gypsy put one arm around her, but more for support than anything else. Her stern face did not relax.

Manchester turned to Ben Bragg and found that the outlaw had received his last injury. Hagar had shot, and not in vain; Ben never knew what hurt him.

"Heaven be praised! you are here!" murmured Mirabel, brokenly. "But, Walter? Where is he? Don't, don't tell me harm has come to him! Where is Walter?"

With a very business-like air Hagar turned the speaker around until her gaze fell upon the hunter. The flash of joy that overspread her face was something he could not fail to read.

"Did you think me injured?" he asked, gently.

"The outlaw fired at you—"

"And missed. I live, and he is dead. He's beyond punishment for his brutality to you."

Hagar suddenly started and raised her rifle. Walter turned quickly to see the new cause of danger. Ceph Peters was there, white-faced and maimed, dragging his heavy body slowly over the ground, heedless of living, but gazing at Ben Bragg with glowing eyes.

Manchester checked Hagar.

"Wait!" he directed; "the man is near to death!"

Forward crawled Ceph, his strength perceptible at its last ebb, still heedless of the trio; still gazing unceasingly at the fallen man. Laboriously, painfully he crossed the intervening space and was by Ben's body. Still lying flat, himself, he drew his own shoulders up until they rested on Ben's breast, and then sought with both hands for pulse and heart of the faithless partner.

Joy flashed into his face.

"Dead!" he whispered, huskily. "Dead, and I am revenged! I shall go on my next trail—alone!"

The last word was barely audible, and as it passed his lips Ceph's head fell forward on Ben's body. He never stirred again. The men who had gone on so many trails of crime together lay dead with their pulseless hearts side by side.

"Let us go!" urged Manchester. "This is not an agreeable scene, and we want to rejoin our friends."

The return was begun with unanimous consent, and they hastened on over rocks and through gulches. There was much to explain, but they spoke only of recent events. More delicate subjects remained untouched, but several times when the hunter paused to assist

Mirabel over a difficult point her face flushed, and there was that in her expression which told that the "Asher" artifice would not long be continued.

They neared the rocks of the human face.

A single rifle-shot was heard, and others followed in quick succession. There was fighting at the rocks.

They paused, listened and hesitated; then Walter said:

"Remain here, and I will scout in that direction."

"No!" authoritatively answered Hagar. "Do you remain, and I will scout. Do you doubt my ability?" she sharply added, as he began to remonstrate. "I tell you, *your* place is here. Remain!"

There was no opposing the imperious woman, and, as she hastened away, Walter watched with mingled feelings of amusement, anxiety and chagrin. He did not doubt her ability, but to be left behind while a woman acted the scout was not flattering to his pride.

"Mr. Manchester!" spoke Mirabel, hesitatingly.

He turned quickly.

"Miss Wayland?" he returned, impulsively; then paused and awkwardly added: "I beg your pardon; I did not intend—"

"Do not apologize; I am aware that my identity is known to you."

"More than that," he cried, "your *innocence* is known to me. Jonas Chapin has confessed; it was he and Elbridge who tried to poison Horace Granger!"

"Just Providence, I thank Thee!" Mirabel murmured.

Presently she grew calmer and added:

"I felt sure the crime, if crime there was, lay at their door. I harm Horace Granger? Why, he is my own grandfather!"

A flood of light to the hunter's mind, broke in upon the affection which, according to Doctor Allenton's story, had existed between Mirabel and Granger.

"Listen!" impulsively, eagerly added the girl. "Chance may any moment separate us again; I want you to know the truth. Horace Granger had three children. His son, and his son's family, are away on a three years' cruise in the ship of which James, the son, is captain—unless recently returned. My deceased mother was a second child; the third, Hannah, married one Abram Hunter."

"Aunt Hannah was always weak and unscrupulous. Abram Hunter proved to be all evil, and, under his influence, she went from bad to worse. They conspired to get possession of my grandfather's property, and, failing in the first attempt, laid a plan to have him proved insane and committed to an asylum. Alarmed—even fearing for his life, as I will explain later—he fled to the West and settled at Liberty. Only I knew where he was."

"He was aged and in a strange place. Finally he grew lonely and sent for me to join him—of course, secretly. I went, but, before going, did one thing I have since regretted. I knew the Hunters had gained possession of valuable papers which grandfather had secreted where he thought they would not be found. I stole them—if that is the proper word—and fled; but did not do the work alone."

"Captain Talcott—that is not his real name—was in town, he having lived there in his youth, and returned on a visit. I felt the need of help, and he was my ally. Evil as he is I deeply regret that I deceived him then, but I yielded to temptation when the moment came, and did deceive him in a way I think to my discredit."

"I went to Liberty and joined my grandfather. He was living under an assumed name, his real one not being Granger at all; and it was his idea that our relationship be kept secret."

"Right here let me explain briefly about Elbridge and Doctor Allenton, for you must have heard the rumors connecting my name with theirs. As for Elbridge, I never encouraged him, and any statement to the contrary is false. I feared and disliked him from the first. Doctor Allenton I respected, and knew to be an honest man, and my inclinations—not love—prompted me to accept his offer of marriage; but I soon learned that I had made a mistake. Finally, he saw fit to misconstrue evidences of my affection for my grandfather, and left the town in anger. Frankly, I was not sorry."

"But about my grandfather. He accused me of trying to poison him. That was a horrible experience, and it came when I was nervous and under deep fear. I had heard that the Hunters accused me of taking money from their house when I took the legal papers—a charge infamously false—and were going to have me arrested for theft, if found. Moreover, grandfather had just received a warning letter from a friend, saying his hiding-place was discovered, and we were both preparing to flee again, and both excited and wrought up, when the final crash came."

"Imagine my feelings when, as I thought, my grandfather died. I was overwhelmed; I was left friendless. Then came his strange recovery, and his assertion that I had poisoned him. I knew, but no one else did, the basis of that charge. He had repeatedly told me that Han-

nah Hunter tried to poison him, and, insane from the poison, he confused me with her, and made the dreadful accusation.

"Roger Elbridge seized upon the chance to secure revenge. He had failed to induce me to marry him, but would arrest me for murder. You know of my flight—a step I have always regretted, but my nerves were unstrung; I was wild with fear. Arrested for poisoning my own grandfather? Horrible thought! I fled quickly, madly, unreasoningly."

"Finally, I found myself saved by Dark John and Hagar. Sullen and curt as they are to others, they were kind to me. At their suggestion I assumed boy's clothes and passed as their son. For awhile this spring I returned to the garments of my sex, but found that I was attracting too much attention as the 'Wild Girl Rider.' I again became Asher."

"From you I have received more of kindness than I deserved, Mr. Manchester. My desertion of you in the timber, last fall, was most unkind, but John and Hagar said I must leave you or them; they would not have your company."

"Since we met the last time I have seen your suspicions of the boy Asher grow day by day, but, at all times, you have been kind and considerate. For this, and for your early kindness to a friendless girl, I am deeply grateful. Whatever I have been, *your* conduct has been noble!"

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE LAST DESPERATE RISK.

The reckless boldness of Captain Tom Talcott in ordering his men to make a charge which meant certain death to him thrilled both friend and foe, but his followers were not mad enough to obey. Their leader's life was deemed too valuable to be lost, and the resolution of a man like Hailstorm Harv could not be trifled with.

Instead, one of the besiegers resorted to arguments and a speech intended to alarm the defenders, but without result. Failing to frighten anybody, the outlaws fell back a few yards to consult, followed by very uncomplimentary remarks from reckless Captain Talcott.

Hailstorm Harv and Dark John continued to watch closely, and soon saw a familiar figure join the consulting besiegers. It was Roger Elbridge.

The deputy-sheriff began to talk excitedly.

"Roger is r'iled about somethin'," Harv observed.

"At me, doubtless," Talcott indifferently replied. "I took away the men I had loaned him to chase you. He let you do up several of them at the base of the peak, near my camp, and this, together with our discovery that you had been almost in our maw, and then got away, so worked on me that I took all my men into my own command again. Roger was mad—he probably is mad now."

"Some o' your men step over ter his side."

"The scoundrels! dare they side with him? And dare he stir up a mutiny in my band?"

"The 'hull gang takes sides, an' wepons are drawn!"

Talcott leaped to his feet.

"The scoundrel!—the vile dog!" the irate captain shouted. "Give me a rifle! Let me shoot him!"

"Not a bit on't!" Harv coolly replied. "Et is dog eat dog, an' the more dogs that git eat, the better fer us!"

A rifle-shot sounded.

"Ha! Elbridge has shot yer lieutenant!"

Again Talcott began to rave wildly, but his words were cut short by a general volley below.

"Ha! they go at each other, tooth, nail an' bowie-knives. Whoop! somebody's goin' ter git licked!"

"A rifle!" insisted Talcott. "Let me shoot Elbridge, and every one of your party goes safe to the settlements!"

"Can't do it; let the fellers fight. Hi! Elbridge goes down; he's a prisoner; t'other side wins!"

"Thank the fiends for that! Have they got him fast?"

"Yes."

"Hailstorm Harv, I've got a new scheme. On the whole, I don't want to die. Why should I, just to satisfy a small grudge? True, I believe the wound I carry was given by *you*, but you and I are old bordermen; such things are to be expected. I've moved against you to satisfy Elbridge, with whom I reluctantly made a bargain; but he has now started a mutiny in my camp. He shall suffer for it; I'll swing him up from the limb of a tree, if I get a chance. Moreover, he says you shall not go back to the settlements, while I say, by Satan, *you shall!*"

The fiery outlaw smote his own knee, and then winced from the pain of the old wound.

"That's business!" Harv agreed. "You have no cause to be down on us, fer ef we've given you an' your men any licks, et was in self-defense."

"Gospel truth, though it wouldn't go if my wrath against Elbridge were not at fever heat; but the man who stirs my own men up to mutiny has got to pay the debt. Hear me when I swear that if you will let me go to my camp, you shall go safely to the settlements."

Harv looked helplessly at Dark John, but the shrewd, bold rover was not at a loss for a plan.

"Talcott," he remarked, impressively, "we cannot release you until our own party is re-united and safety assured, but this we will do: You can go to your men, but you must have our company. Harv and I will walk one on each side of you, with our drawn revolvers at your heart. It will then be in your power to have us slain, but, before it can be done, we shall be able to shoot you dead!"

The boldness of this scheme caught Talcott's fancy.

"Your offer is accepted!" he cried.

Doctor Allenton remained behind, and it was a sight he never could forget when the trio went down the hill. The unsurpassed courage of Harv and John thrilled him, and their manner, bold but free from ostentation, indicated perfect calmness on their part. Not so with the doctor; it seemed to him they were going to certain death.

The minutes passed—one, five, ten, fifteen. He had heard nothing; seen nothing. What was occurring behind the intervening vail of rocks? His spirits went even lower.

But see! Back up the hill came the same trio, Dark John and Hailstorm Harv unharmed; as cool as ever, too.

Voices sounded behind the doctor. He turned and saw Manchester, Hagar and "Asher." They were safe; they had successfully passed the point of danger. The whole party were reunited, and general congratulations followed. Harv came close to Allenton and spoke in a low voice:

"Roger Elbridge has paid the debt; he is dead. Talcott is avenged. Add a rope and a tree, and the story is told."

In a louder voice the guide added:

"We start at once fer civilization, an' Cap'n Talcott guarantees us safety. Jonas Chapin is in the cap'n's camp, wounded an' sick. We don't want him, do we?"

"Decidedly, *yes!*" declared Manchester. "Wounded though he is, he must go. More than that, he must live the journey out."

"Your word goes as fur as tryin' ter take him goes. Hustle, pilgrims; we start at once!"

They were soon in motion—Dark John, Hagar, Mirabel, who was mounted again on her wounded but fast-recovering horse; Manchester, Harv, Allenton and Jonas Chapin. Talcott, stubbornly enduring the pain of riding, went with them for two miles, and then, giving them a written passport of safety, turned back.

"We won't be so hypocritical as to shake hands," he observed, "but you shall see that Tom Talcott is a man of his word!"

With a slight gesture of farewell he rode away.

The journey to the settlements was made in safety.

The utmost persuasion of their companions could not induce Dark John and Hagar to accompany them any further than was necessary. The parting was on the prairie, and the wayward Gypsies remained grim and stoical almost to the last. Mirabel wept at the parting, for reserved as they were, their kindness to her had been great and unfailing.

When Dark John took her hand for the last time he briefly uttered:

"Go thy way, and may you never know sorrow again!"

While dark and bony Hagar spoke four words in a low voice:

"God bless you, child!"

She straightened up suddenly and rode away, but upon Mirabel's hand one tear had fallen which came not from Mirabel's eyes. The iron had been moved—the rock proven not wholly obdurate.

Swiftly the wayward pair rode away, not once looking back. Mirabel never saw them again.

Better news awaited them at Liberty. Horace Granger was recovering, and had retracted his charge against Mirabel, horrified to learn he had ever made it. And Jonas Chapin, brought back alive only by Doctor Allenton's strong efforts, lived to confess that he and Elbridge had been the poisoners. Then Chapin's life fled.

Allenton concluded to accept the situation gracefully, congratulated Mirabel, and went his way.

At this opportune time Granger's son, the sea-captain, returned from his voyage, and the two, with Mirabel, joined legal issues against the Hunters so successfully that both of the latter schemers were overthrown and sent to prison.

It has already been read between the lines that Walter and Mirabel were to marry. They did marry, and live now in the East, with Horace Granger as a member of their family. Health and wealth are restored to him. Manchester is done with the prairies, and is happier than ever before.

Hailstorm Harv still follows the life he likes so well.

Of Captain Talcott stories strange, wild and lawless continued to be told, but there were those who put one white mark against his long, dark record. True, his course originally had a foundation purely selfish, but at the end he had kept his word when he might have broken it.

THE END.

Pu

145 P

160 S

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375 F

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402 S

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478 I

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525 E

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558 P

568 T

590 M

603 D

622 E

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507 The Drummer Detective.
526 Death-Grip, the Tenderfoot Detective.
538 Rube Rocket, the Tent Detective.
554 Mad Sharp, the Rustler.
572 Jaunty Joe, the Jockey Detective.

BY PERCY B. ST. JOHN.

57 The Silent Hunter.
86 The Big Hunter; or, The Queen of the Woods.

BY WM. G. PATTEN.

545 Hustler Harry, the Cowboy Sport.
571 Old Dismal, the Range Detective.
602 Captain Nameless, the Mountain Mystery.

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417 Tucson Tom; or, The Fire Trailers.

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32 B'hoys of Yale; or, The Scraps of Collegians.
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76 The Queen's Musketeers. By George Albany.
78 The Mysterious Spy. By Arthur M. Grainger.
102 The Masked Band. By George L. Aiken.
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133 Rody the Rover. By William Carleton.
140 The Three Spaniards. By Geo. Walker.
144 The Hunchback of Notre Dame. By Victor Hugo.
146 The Doctor Detective. By George Lemuel.
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153 The Doomed Dozen. By Dr. Frank Powell.
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 45 Old Bull's-Eye, the Lightning Shot.
 47 Pacific Pete, the Prince of the Revolver.
 50 Jack Rabbit, the Prairie Sport.
 64 Double-Sight, the Death Shot.
 67 The Boy Jockey; or, Honesty vs Crookedness.
 71 Captain Cool Blade; or, Mississippi Man Shark.
 88 Big George; or, The Five Outlaw Brothers.
 105 Dan Brown of Denver; or, The Detective.
 119 Alabama Joe; or, The Yazoo Man-Hunters.
 127 Sol Scott, the Masked Miner.
 141 Equinox Tom, the Bul'y of Red Rock.
 154 Joaquin, the Saddle King.
 165 Joaquin, the Terrible.
 170 Sweet William, the Trapper Detective.
 180 Old '49; or, The Amazon of Arizona.
 197 Revolver Rob; or, The Belle of Nugget Camp.
 201 Pirate of the Placers; or, Joaquin's Death Hunt.
 233 The Old Boy of Tombstone.
 241 Spitfire Saul, King of the Rustlers.
 249 Elephant Tom, of Durango.
 257 Death Trap Diggings; or, A Man 'Way Back.
 258 Sieck Sam, the Devil of the Mines.
 286 Pistol Johnny; or, One Man in a Thousand.
 292 Moke Horner, the Boss Roustabout.
 302 Faro Saul, the Handsome Hercules.
 317 Frank Lightfoot, the Miner Detective.
 324 Old Forked Lightnin', the Solitary.
 331 Chispa Charley, the Gold Nugget Sport.
 339 Spread Eagle Sam, the Hercules Hide Hunter.
 345 Masked Mark, the Mounted Detective.
 351 Nor' West Nick, the Border Detective.
 355 Stormy Steve, the Mad Athlete.
 360 Jumping Jerry, the Gamecock from Sundown.
 367 A Royal Flush; or, Dan Brown's Big Game.
 372 Captain Crisp, the Man with a Record.
 379 Howling Jonathan, the Terror from Headwaters.
 387 Dark Durg, the Ishmael of the Hills.
 395 Deadly Aim, the Duke of Derringers.
 403 The Nameless Sport.
 409 Rob Roy Ranch; or, The Imps of Pan Handle.
 416 Monte Jim, the Black Sheep of Bismarck.
 426 The Ghost Detective; or, The Secret Service Spy.
 433 Laughing Leo; or, Sam's Dandy Pard.
 438 Oklahoma Nick.
 443 A Cool Hand; or, Pistol Johnny's Picnic.
 450 The Rustler Detective.
 458 Dutch Dan, the Pilgrim from Spitzenberg.
 466 Old Rough and Ready, the Sage of Sundown.
 474 Daddy Dead-Eye, the Despot of Dew Drop.
 488 The Thoroughbred Sport.
 495 Rattlepate Rob; or, The Roundhead's Reprisal.
 504 Solemn Saul, the Sad Man from San Saba.
 514 Gabe Gunn, the Grizzly from Ginseng.
 527 Dandy Andy, the Diamond Detective.
 535 Dandy Dutch, the Decorator from Dead-Lift.
 541 Major Magnet, the Man of Nerve.
 547 The Buried Detective; or, Sam's Six Sensations.
 555 Grip-Sack Sid, the Sample Sport.
 564 The Grip-Sack Sharp; or, The Seraphs of Sodom.
 576 Silver-Tongued Sid; or, Grip Sack Sharp's Sweep.
 588 Sandy Sands, the Sharp from Snap City.
 597 Big Bandy, the Brigadier of Brimstone Butte.
 617 The Grip Sack Sharp's Even up.

BY JACKSON KNOX—"Old Hawk."

386 Hawk Heron, the Falcon Detective.
 424 Hawk Heron's Deputy.
 444 The Magic Detective; or, The Hidden Hand.
 451 Griplock, the Rocket Detective.
 462 The Circus Detective.
 467 Mainwaring, the Salamander.
 477 Dead-arm Brandt.
 485 Rowlock, the Harbor Detective.
 494 The Detective's Spy.
 501 Springsteel Steve, the Retired Detective.
 509 Old Falcon, the Thunderbolt Detective.
 515 Short-Stop Maje, the Diamond Field Detective.
 536 Old Falcon's Foe; or, The Detective's Swell Job.
 548 Falconbridge, the Sphinx Detective.
 561 The Thug King; or, The Falcon Detective's Foe.
 574 Old Falcon's Double.
 582 Joram, the Detective Expert.
 595 Wellborn, the Upper Crust Detective.
 606 The Drop Detective.
 616 Magnus, the Weird Detective.

BY WILLIAM H. MANNING.

279 The Gold Dragoon, or, California Bloodhound.
 297 Colorado Rube, the Strong Arm of Hotspur.
 385 Will Dick Turpin, the Leadville Lion.
 405 Old Baldy, the Brigadier of Buck Basin.
 415 Hot Heart, the Detective Spy.
 427 The Rivals of Montana Mill.
 437 Deep Duke; or, The Man of Two Lives.
 442 Wild West Walt, the Mountain Veteran.
 449 Bluff Burke, King of the Rockies.
 455 Yank Yellowbird, the Tall Hustler of the Hills.
 463 Gold Gauntlet, the Gulch Gladiator.
 470 The Duke of Dakota.
 479 Gladiator Gabe, the Samson of Sassajack.
 486 Kansas Kitten, the Northwest Detective.
 492 Border Bullet, the Prairie Sharpshooter.
 498 Central Pacific Paul, the Mail Train Spy.
 506 Uncle Honest, the Peacemaker of Hornets' Nest.
 513 Texas Tartar, the Man With Nine Lives.
 521 Paradise Sam, the Nor'-West Pilot.
 531 Saddle-Chief Kit, the Prairie Centaur.
 539 Old Doubledark, the Wily Detective.
 551 Garry Kean, the Man with Backbone.
 563 Wyoming Zeke, the Hotspur of Honeysuckle.
 575 Steady Hand, the Napoleon of Detectives.
 585 Dan Dixon's Double.
 596 Rustler Rube; the Round-Up Detective.
 611 Alkali Abe, the Game Chicken from Texas.
 623 Dangerous Dave, the Never-Beaten Detective.

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2 The Dare Devil; or, The Winged S-a Witch.
 85 The Cretan Rover; or, Zuleikah the Beautiful.
 89 The Pirate Prince; or, The Queen of the Isle.
 94 Freelance, the Buccaneer.
 103 Merle, the Mutineer; or, The Red Anchor Brand.
 104 Montezuma, the Merciless.
 109 Captain Kyd, the King of the Black Flag.
 116 Black Plume; or, The Sorceress of Hell Gate.
 121 The Sea Cadet; or, The Rover of the Rigoletts.
 128 The Chevalier Corsair; or, The Heritage.
 131 Buckskin Sam, the Texas Trailer.
 134 Darkey Dan, the Colored Detective.
 139 Fire Eye; or, The Bride of a Buccaneer.
 147 Gold Spur, the Gentleman from Texas.
 155 The Corsair Queen; or, The Gypsies of the Sea.
 162 The Mad Mariner; or, Dishonored and Disowned.
 168 Wild Bill, the Pistol Dead Shot.
 172 Black Pirate; or, The Golden Fetters Mystery.
 175 Wild Bill's Trump Card; or, The Indian Heiress.
 177 Don Diablo, the Planter-Corsair.
 181 The Scarlet Schooner; or, The Sea Nemesis.
 184 The Ocean Vampire; or, The Castle Heiress.
 189 Wild Bill's Gold Trail; or, The Desperate Dozen.
 198 The Skeleton Schooner; or, The Skimmer.
 205 The Gambler Pirate; or, Lady of the Lagoon.
 210 Buccaneer Boss the Lioness of the Sea.
 216 The Corsair Planter; or, Driven to Doom.
 220 The Specter Yacht; or, A Brother's Crime.
 224 Black Beard, the Buccaneer.
 231 The Kid Glove Miner; or, The Magic Doctor.
 235 Red Lightning the Man of Chance.
 246 Queen Helen, the Amazon of the Overland.
 255 The Pirate Priest; or, The Gambler's Daughter.
 259 Cutlass and Cross; or, the Ghouls of the Sea.
 281 The Sea Owl; or, The Lady Captain of the Gulf.
 307 The Phantom Pirate; or, The Water Wolves.
 318 The Indian buccaneer; or, The Red Rovers.
 325 The Gentleman Pirate; or, The Casco Hermits.
 329 The League of Three; or, Buffalo Bill's Pledge.
 336 The Magic Ship; or, Sandy Hook Freebooters.
 341 The Sea Desperado.
 346 Ocean Guerrillas; or, Phantom Midshipman.
 362 Buffalo Bill's Grip; or, Oath Bound to Custer.
 364 The Sea Fugitive; or, The Queen of the Coast.
 369 The Coast Corsair; or, The Siren of the Sea.
 373 Sailor of Fortune; or, The Barnegat Buccaneer.
 377 Afloat and Ashore; or, The Corsair Conspirator.
 388 The Giant Buccaneer; or, The Wrecker Witch.
 393 The Convict Captain.
 399 The New Monte Cristo.
 418 The Sea Siren; or, The Fugitive Privateer.
 425 The Sea Sword; or, The Ocean Rivals.
 430 The Fatal Frigate; or, Rivals in Love and War.
 435 The One-Armed Buccaneer.
 446 Ocean Ogre, the Outcast Corsair.
 457 The Sea Insurgent.
 469 The Lieutenant Detective.
 476 Bob Brent, the Buccaneer.
 482 Ocean Tramps.
 489 The Pirate Hunter.
 493 The Scouts of the Sea.
 510 El Moro, the Corsair Commodore.
 516 Chatard, the Dead-Shot Duelist.
 524 The Sea Chaser; or, The Pirate Noble.
 530 The Savages of the Sea.
 540 The Fleet Scourge; or, The Sea Wings of Salem.
 546 The Doomed Whal-r; or, The Life Wreck.
 553 Mark Monte, the Mutineer; or, The Branded Brig.
 560 The Man from Mexico.
 581 The Outlawed Skipper; or, The Gantlet Runner.
 587 Conrad, the Sailor Spy.
 593 The Sea Rebel.
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 605 The Shadow Silver Ship.
 610 The Red Flag Rover.
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 625 Red Wings; or, The Gold Seekers of the Bahamas.

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52 Death-Trailer, the Chief of Scouts.
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 243 The Pilgrim Sharp; or, The Soldier's Sweetheart.
 304 Texas Jack, the Prairie Rattler.
 319 Wild Bill, the Whirlwind of the West.
 394 White Beaver, the Exile of the Platte.
 397 The Wizard Brothers; or, White B a ver's Trail.
 401 One-Armed Pard; or, Borderland Retribution.
 414 Red Renard, the Indian Detective.
 599 The Dead Shot Nine; or, My Pards of the Plains.

BY CAPTAIN HOWARD HOLMES.

278 Hercules Goldspur, the Man of the Velvet Hand.
 294 Broadcloth Burt, the Denver Dandy.
 321 California Claude, the Lone Bandit.
 335 Flash Dan, the Nabob; or, Blades of Bowie Bar.
 340 Cool Conrad, the Dakota Detective.
 347 Denver Duke, the Man with "Sand."
 352 The Desperate Dozen.
 365 Keen Kennard, the Shasta Shadow.
 374 Major Blister, the Sport of Two Cities.
 382 The Bonanza Band; or, Dread Don of Cool Clan.
 392 The Lost Bonanza; or, The Boot of Silent Hound.
 400 Captain Coldgrip; or, The New York Spotter.
 407 Captain Coldgrip's Nerve; or, Injun Nick.
 413 Captain Coldgrip in New York.
 421 Father Ferret, the Frisco Shadow.
 434 Lucifer Lynx, the Wonder Detective.
 441 The California Sharp.
 447 Volcano, the Frisco Spy.
 453 Captain Coldgrip's Long Trail.
 460 Captain Coldgrip, the Detective.
 468 Coldgrip in Deadwood.
 480 Hawkspear, the Man with a Secret.
 487 Sunshine Sam, a Chip of the Old Block.
 496 Richard Redfire, the Two Worlds' Detective.
 505 Phil Fox, the Gentle Spotter.
 512 Captain Velvet's Big Stake.
 523 Reynard of Red Jack; or, The Lost Detective.
 532 Jack Javert, the Independent Detective.
 543 The Magnate Detective.
 550 Silk Hand, the Mohave Ferret.
 559 Danton, the Shadow Sharp.
 569 Captain Cobra, the Hooded Mystery.
 579 Old Cormorant, the Bowery Shadow.
 592 Captain Sid, the Shasta Ferret.
 608 Silent Sam, the Shadow Sphinx.

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 36 Injun Dick; or, The Death Shot of Shasta.
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 93 Captain Dick Talbot, King of the Road.
 97 Bronze Jack, the California Thoroughbred.
 101 The Man from New York.
 107 Richard Talbot, of Cinnabar.
 112 Joe Phenix, Private Detective.
 130 Captain Voicano or, The Man of Red Revolver.
 161 The Wolves of New York; or, Joe Phenix's Hunt.
 173 California John, the Pacific Thoroughbred.
 196 La Marmoset, the Detective Queen.
 203 The Double Detective; or, The Midnight Mystery.
 252 The Wall Street Blood; or, The Telegraph Girl.
 320 The Gentle Spotter; or, The N. Y. Night Hawk.
 349 Iron-Hearted Dick, the Gentleman Road-Agent.
 354 Red Richard; or, The Crimson Cross Brand.
 363 Crowningshield, the Detective.
 370 The Dusky Detective; or, Pursued to the End.
 376 Black Beards; or, The Rio Grande High Horse.
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 384 Injun Dick, Detective; or, Tracked to New York.
 391 Kate Scott, the Decoy Detective.
 408 Doc Grip, the Vendetta of Death.
 419 The Bat of the Battery; or, Joe Phenix, Detective.
 423 The Lone Hand; or, The Red River Recrants.
 440 The High Hor e of the Pacific.
 461 The Fresh on the Rio Grande.
 465 The Actor Detective.
 475 Chin Chin, the Chinese Detective.
 490 The Lone Hand in Texas.
 497 The Fresh in Texas.
 520 The Lone Hand on the Caddo.
 529 The Fresh in New York.
 537 Blake, the Mountain Lion.
 556 Fresh, the Sport-Chevaier.
 562 Lone Hand, the Shadow.
 570 The Actress Detective; or, The Invisible Hand.
 577 Tom of California.
 583 The Silver Sharp Detective.
 594 Fire Face, the Silver King's Foe.
 601 Joe Phenix's Shadow.
 607 Old Benzine, the "Hard Case" Detective.
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 620 Joe Phenix's Silent Six.

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